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New Three Year Project on Strengthening Local Government Launched Today by Council of Europe, Swiss Cooperation and Ministry of Interior

A joint partnership between the Swiss Cooperation, the Council of Europe and the Ministry of Interior has made possible a new project on strengthening local government in Albania. The project will aim at introducing new methods in order to improve performance of local government units.

Wednesday, February 27th, Tirana – Further strengthening of local government structures is crucial to Albania's democratisation and decentralisation process. This message was delivered loudly and clearly today during the launching event of a new project titled "Strengthening Local Government Structures and Cooperation of Local Elected Representatives in Albania". The launch took place at Tirana International Hotel and was attended by the Swiss Ambassador, H.E. Alexander Wittwer, Deputy Minister of Interior, Ferdinand Poni, Council of Europe and Swiss Cooperation representatives, and other local government and donor representatives.

"Today's event marks another milestone in our development efforts as we launch a new phase of our joint project on strengthening local government", said H.E. Alexander Wittwer, Swiss Ambassador in Albania. Ambassador Wittwer emphasised the role played by the Council of Europe and the Ministry of Interior in supporting local government structures and the importance local government has for a country's democratic development. "I am convinced that more inter-municipal cooperation and a better human resource management will prove successful methods for having fully-functional and performing local government structures as well as better quality of services for citizens", said the Ambassador.

In his speech, Alfonso Zardi, Head of Democratic Governance and Institutions Department of the Council of Europe, welcomed the trust and contribution of the Swiss Government towards the Council of Europe as well as the commitment of the Ministry of Interior to the reform of the local self-government. He emphasised that this new phase of the Project opens new avenues for in-depth co-operation with the Albanian authorities with a view to further improving the local self-government functioning in Albania. Mr. Zardi highlighted that together the Council of Europe and the Albanian authorities can further contribute to finding efficient and workable solutions to a sustainable inter-municipal co-operation and an advanced human resource management system in Albania.

Helen Eadie, speaking on behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, recalled that the project is part of the priorities of co-operation between the Council of Europe and Albania. She presented the Congress initiative aimed at nurturing a process for a common platform of dialogue for local and regional authorities. "We will help local and regional authorities of Albania to increase their co-operation and dialogue with a multi-partisan view and pluralistic approach" she stated. Ms Eadie also highlighted the presence of many mayors, heads of communes, and presidents of regions who "have already shown a strong commitment to the aims of the project and to working on issues of common concern". "With this project, we hope to contribute to further developing local

political governance as a tangible part of democracy and to help building trust and confidence by the citizens in the democratic institutions of Albania”, she added.

Deputy Minister of Interior, Ferdinand Poni assured the international partners of the government’s commitment towards the process of decentralisation and local government autonomy. “For Albania the improvement of local government functioning is an obligation and an objective at the same time”, said Deputy Minister Poni. He called on local government representatives to continue taking up responsibilities and increase their functions and performance as envisioned in the project’s goals.

Marco Leidekker, the Head of Office of Council of Europe in Tirana, moderated the event. After the speeches, participants attended a reception that provided a chance to network and mingle for partners, stakeholders and beneficiaries.

With funding by the Swiss Cooperation Office in Albania, the project will be implemented by the Council of Europe in close collaboration with the Ministry of Interior and other stakeholders. It follows a preceding phase whereby new methods of improving the functioning of local government were tried such as *inter-municipal cooperation* and *human resource management*.

The new project will address several constraints and weaknesses present at the level of local governance in Albania, such as limited cooperation between municipalities, low implementation of human resource management, and a lack of unified representation of local government structures. During the previous phase that ran until the end of 2012, several key results included an increased recognition of inter-municipal cooperation as a tool for better service efficiency, the introduction of modern practices of human resource management and a local government assessment along the European Charter that served as a basis for the current phase of the project.

For the Swiss Cooperation, this project is one of the many efforts to strengthen democracy and further decentralisation in Albania. For both the Swiss Cooperation and the Council of Europe, supporting local government structures is an essential part of their respective development strategies for Albania.

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