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PRESS RELEASE

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EuFoA welcomes police handling of demonstrations in Yerevan

European Friends of Armenia (www.eufoa.org) is relieved about the decision by Yerevan police to avoid any clashes and allow yesterday's demonstration of the Armenian National Congress (ANC) to move onto Opera Square, even though it was not authorised in that place.

"The development is still very fresh, but Armenia today seems to be more democratic and the current authorities seem to act differently from those in March 2008. Generally positive developments were also noted yesterday by the Council of Europe delegation headed by John Prescott." commented EuFoA Secretary General Michael Kambeck.

Europe is strongly supporting the democratic development of Armenia from the side of the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and especially in the framework of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership. The EU has repeatedly asked for a more constructive political dialogue among Armenia's political parties. "Of course the situation in Armenia is entirely different from those in Northern Africa. But let me be clear: It is the democratic right of the ANC to make use of the developments in Northern Africa in order to organise public rallies, though it is still unclear to us why they insisted on moving the rally away from the authorised place and onto the Opera Square. On the side of the authorities, we hope that they will continue to apply maximum restraint and seek new forms of fostering a constructive dialogue." concluded Kambeck in an initial reaction.

Background:

On 17 March 2011, the extra-parliamentary opposition group ANC, led by Levon Ter-Petrosian, organised an authorised demonstration in the centre of Yerevan, attended by around 10.000 people (according to the ANC). They then announced to move the rally to the Opera Square. It is a fact that this square is surrounded by the most relevant traffic routes in the town centre. Yerevan police argue that protests on Opera Square led to severe disruptions in the past while the ANC claims that the authorities simply do not want to have a repetition of the 2008 situation on the square. Arguably, Ter-Petrosian is the most vocal opposition politician, however, according to the last international poll in Armenia of 23 November 2010 (<http://www.eufoa.org/uploads/Armenia%20Final%20Report.pdf>), he strongly polarises and has a support of between 2% (countryside) and 5% (Yerevan). As first President of the Armenian Republic, he was accused by the international community for having suppressed the protests after the allegedly fraudulent elections in 1996 and his ban of the biggest opposition party – Dashnaktsutyun. Since 2008, the ANC is a major factor pressuring the current leadership for more reforms and most notably, with the Dashnaktsutyun and the Heritage party, forms a diverse and active opposition scene – unthinkable in Northern Africa.

EuFoA is happy to provide commenting or background analysis in English, German, French, Italian, Polish, Russian and Armenian. Members of the Europe-Armenia Advisory Council may also be available for comments; for enquiries please contact our secretariat.

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