



EUROPEAN UNION

First Preparatory Meeting of the 29th OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum Vienna, 15 – 16 February 2021

EU Opening Statement

The European Union and its Member States are pleased to participate in the First Preparatory Meeting of the 29th Economic and Environmental Forum. We would like to thank the Swedish Chairpersonship and the OSCE Coordinator of Economic and Environmental Activities and his team for organising this meeting.

We appreciate the wide range of speakers from public and private sector as well as civil society and academia. We are looking forward to an exchange with speakers from various backgrounds during this Forum and throughout the whole year within the framework of the second dimension.

We would also like to thank the speakers for their introductory remarks that stressed the importance of strengthening our focus and our actions in the area of women's empowerment and gender equality.

This year's Economic and Environmental Forum, focusing on "*Promoting comprehensive security, stability and sustainable development in the OSCE area through women's economic empowerment*", is a valuable opportunity to further deepen and broaden our work on this important and timely issue, also taking into account the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout on women.

Participation of women in economic and environmental decision-making is of utmost importance for the EU. Gender equality is a fundamental EU value, an EU objective and a driver for economic growth. Although inequalities still exist, the EU has made

significant progress in gender equality over the last decades. This is the result of equal treatment legislation, gender mainstreaming - integration of the gender perspective into all other policies - and specific measures for the advancement of women. Despite the encouraging trends, gender gaps remain and in the labour market women are still over-represented in lower paid sectors and immensely under-represented in decision-making positions.

We are pleased that a number of key EU priorities, also those included in EU strategic documents such as the EU Commission Gender Strategy 2020 - 2025, will be addressed in this Meeting, such as promoting equality in decision-making and economic independence, challenging gender stereotypes through addressing all forms of discrimination, negative attitudes and behaviour against women, including through education, and closing gender gaps in income, labour market or STEM (Sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics) sectors.

We are happy that the topic of women in the digital field is included in our agenda for this Forum. We hope to build on the work of the Italian Chairmanship in 2018: following the Conference on “Digital Transformation – Challenges and Opportunities for Women to Shape Economic Progress”, the participating States agreed in Milan on promoting “education, vocational training and retraining, in particular for women and girls, and especially in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, as a key measure to reduce digital divides and to advance the empowerment of women”.

Women’s economic empowerment that contributes to gender equality is a prerequisite for economic growth, prosperity and competitiveness and thus for the stability and well-being of our societies. It is, therefore, a highly relevant topic in our organisation. We believe that it is crucial that the OSCE integrates a gender perspective throughout its programmes, as well as in the technical assistance it offers to governments of participating States.

We believe that this year will give us the opportunity to build on our previous commitments in the field of women’s empowerment, economic participation and gender-equality and thus contributing to advancing gender-mainstreaming, by giving proper consideration to the gender aspects in all areas of the work of the OSCE through implementation of concrete actions, strategies and new commitments.

In conclusion, we would like to express our continuous support to the Swedish Chairpersonship and we are looking forward to fruitful discussions over the next two days.

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO*, SERBIA* and ALBANIA*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, and the EFTA countries ICELAND and LIECHTENSTEIN members of the European Economic Area, as well as UKRAINE, the REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, GEORGIA, ANDORRA and SAN MARINO align themselves with this statement.

* Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.