



EUROPEAN UNION

OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation Group Vienna, 15 March 2021

EU statement: Post-COVID 19 recovery: Opportunities and challenges for security and regional co-operation

Mr. Chairman, let me begin by greeting the participating States and partners for cooperation at the first meeting of the 2021 Mediterranean Group. I also wish to thank the Swedish Chair for their work throughout the difficult year 2020. We wish the same success to the current Polish Chair, to which we offer our support and cooperation.

COVID-19 hit our societies shattering all predictions. In addition to numerous losses of human lives, the pandemic has been also a major shock for our economies. The impact on economic activity has manifested itself with particular violence in certain areas. For instance, tourism, the economic activity of enormous importance for many countries in the Mediterranean, has been hit particularly hard. The negative impact on employment has been particularly severe in the case of youth and women. The vulnerability of these two categories grows alarmingly in the countries in and around the Mediterranean Basin.

In addition to creating new problems, COVID-19 has exacerbated some existing ones. Benefiting from the situation of greater insecurity, organised crime and scourges such as domestic violence, xenophobia and racism have been on a rise.

Multilateral co-operation is key, not only to tackling COVID-19, but all future health threats. We are committed to advancing global health security, including by strengthening the World Health Organization and working towards an international treaty on pandemics within its framework.

Furthermore, international cooperation is crucial, both to transmit accurate information and to prevent disinformation. The necessary measures to overcome

the pandemic must be applied with fairness and proportionality while taking into account the circumstances of the vulnerable population. The efforts against the pandemic or its aftermath should not serve as an excuse for any country to violate human rights or fundamental freedoms, or to dissociate itself from its international commitments.

As part of our global response to the COVID-19 crisis, the EU mobilised over €2.3 billion for the partners in the Southern Neighbourhood - to address the immediate needs, strengthen the health sector and support socioeconomic recovery. Besides that, the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa - North Africa (EUTF Africa) focuses on assisting vulnerable communities in the neighbouring countries by providing emergency medical assistance, distribution of hygiene kits, support health services and infrastructures, social protection and support to victims of sexual and gender-based violence.

We should not limit ourselves to restoring the situation that existed before the outbreak. We must rebuild our economies with respect to the environment and climate-related challenges in mind. We should step up our efforts in combatting corruption, which, besides other things, reduces the effectiveness of any measures to prevent and stop future pandemics. We have to reflect the high social value of the work of women and men in the care and health sectors. We need to strengthen the protection of the vulnerable population, in particular during emergencies.

Our responses to the COVID-19 pandemic can and should contribute to the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We must work to lay foundations that will help us to face future challenges more effectively. This cannot be done without deploying women's full potential. Resilient societies are societies that are fair, inclusive and based on sustainability and gender equality.

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 country ICELAND, member of the European Economic Area as well as UKRAINE, GEORGIA 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.