



EUROPEAN UNION

Second Preparatory Meeting of the 29th OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum Vienna, 10 – 11 June 2021

EU Opening Statement

The European Union and its Member States are pleased to participate in the Second 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 would also like to thank the speakers for their introductory remarks which gave us a glimpse into the scope to our discussions over the two days.

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, while also taking into account the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are looking forward to an exchange with speakers from various backgrounds during this Forum. We appreciate the opportunity to engage on the topic of women's empowerment with a focus on the role of business and civil society in the path towards gender-equality and importance of actively engaging men and boys. We are looking forward to discuss the role of women and girls in protecting the environment and addressing climate change, as well as women in business and trade.

Women's economic empowerment is central to realising women's rights and gender equality. Investing in women's economic independence enables more inclusive economic growth and the eradication of poverty and social exclusion. The 2030

Agenda for Sustainable Development is based on the premise that women's economic empowerment is crucial to sustainable development.

Empowering women is a process by which women gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices. Despite our efforts in this area, women are still disproportionately experiencing precarious working and living conditions, with the impact of the COVID-19 having further detrimental effects – on their safety, their rights and their economic independence. In the current global landscape, we see that gender equality and women's rights are increasingly challenged in many parts of the world while the space for human rights' activists, especially women rights defenders, has been shrinking dramatically.

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 essential to realise that gender equality benefits not only women and girls, but also men and boys. Breaking down stereotypes and promoting equal, inclusive and prosperous societies is for the benefit of all.

It is critical that we act amid the urgency to advance gender equality and that we work together on these issues at all levels, from the top, on policy level and through multilateral cooperation, to the bottom, working closely with grass roots Civil Society organisations at global, regional and local level.

Therefore, we remain convinced that women's empowerment and in our context, particularly its economic elements, are a matter to be discussed and addressed in the OSCE. We would also like to emphasise the importance of ensuring mainstreaming of a gender perspective in OSCE programmes, as well as in the technical assistance OSCE offers to the governments of participating States.

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, GEORGIA, ANDORRA, MONACO 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.