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EU Statement on COVID-19 and its impact on the politico-military aspects of security in the OSCE region

Mr. Chairperson, we thank you for putting this highly relevant and timely topic on today's agenda and thank Secretary General Greminger for his presentation. We regard this discussion as an opportunity for a collective brainstorming on the crisis and the way forward.

The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent limitations it brought to many aspects of our daily lives are unprecedented, with today's virtual meeting being probably one of the most benign ones. The effects of this pandemic will reverberate across many areas of our life for a considerable time to come. We should draw lessons from this crisis and be prepared for similar situations in the future.

We positively assess the structured response within the OSCE from an initial reduction in the number of meetings, to then cancelling them altogether, and finally adapting to a new format like today. At the same time, field activities continued, albeit limited in scope, and the information kept flowing. We wish to thank again the Albanian Chairmanship and the Secretariat for this and, in particular for organizing virtual SMM Chief Monitor briefings and for facilitating agreement on the mandate extension of our largest field mission.

Mr. Chairperson, we, and many others, stressed last week at the opening session, that COVID-19 must not be used as a pretext to ignore violations of international

law and fundamental OSCE principles. This is vital. We reiterate our call on all participating States to continue to focus on these challenges and to work together to mutually enhance our security and reduce the risk of conflict in the OSCE region.

Security requires that all participating States respect and fulfil, in letter and spirit, the obligations which they have undertaken, and commit to reinforce trust, cooperation, and multilateralism. The settlement of conflicts should remain central to the OSCE. The current health crisis is opening new and unknown scenarios in this respect. Unfortunately, conflicts have not taken a pause due to COVID-19, the call to halt hostilities by UN Secretary General Guterres was not heeded. We echo the words of Secretary General Greminger that *“it is heart-breaking and frustrating to see protagonists in regions affected by conflict unwilling to halt the fighting”*.

Mr. Chairperson, we have also been witnessing a new level of disinformation activities with highly dubious or false narratives. COVID-19 affects all, so it is important that medical assistance and measures adopted by participating States are not misused for destabilization or propaganda purposes. It is also unacceptable that the Russia-backed armed formations use the pretext of the pandemic to impose new restrictions on the SMM.

Furthermore, we regret to note, that as the coronavirus pandemic spreads around the world, there are cyber threats and malicious cyber activities targeting essential operators in EU Member States and their international partners, including in the healthcare sector. Since the beginning of the pandemic, significant phishing and malware distribution campaigns have been detected, some affecting critical infrastructures that are essential to managing this crisis. We condemn this malicious behaviour in cyberspace, express solidarity with all countries that are victims of malicious cyber activities and underline our continued support to increasing global cyber resilience.

In many States, the armed forces are playing a significant role in the “whole-of-government and whole-of-society” approach by supporting national responses against the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways (transportation, military labs, field hospitals, etc). They contribute thus to a “comprehensive concept of security”. Some States, for example our host country, decided to mobilise forces to cater for additional needs in relation to the pandemic. It is important that all participating

States are guided in these times by the principles of transparency and openness aimed at ensuring confidence among States and avoiding possible misperceptions.

Transparency is even more important in these times, as verification activities in the field of arms control and CSBMs are understandably on hold. Thus, on top of ongoing implementation issues, the conventional arms control and confidence and security building measures face a new challenge. The postponement of verification activities (inspections, evaluations, Open Skies observation flights), has the potential to further diminish trust among participating States. In this context, we appeal to all States to demonstrate good will and to exercise full transparency by providing adequate information about major military activities. Nevertheless, we believe that the current, mostly digital implementation of arms control and CSBMs mechanisms cannot fully substitute for on the spot activities. These should therefore resume as soon as circumstances allow.

To counter this risk of erosion of trust, we should use what we have at our disposal. In this regard, we should pay increased attention on how the current Global Exchange of Military Information develops. Participating States should also make better use of good practices concerning voluntary measures. Here, additional briefings on military exercises and activities would be both highly recommended and welcome. Such a proactive approach would help dispel concerns with regard to military activities and thus mitigate risk.

We cannot predict how long the current situation will continue. In this context, it is important to continue or even accelerate our work on the modernisation of the available instruments, in particular the Vienna Document, which is vital in order to increase military stability, transparency and predictability.

As the crisis unfolds, we need to be ready to continue our reflection on how to confront it and adapt to it at all relevant fora in the OSCE. In this regard we welcome the continuation of this discussion during the next session of the Structured Dialogue.

In concluding, we sincerely wish that the OSCE will muster the political will to adapt to the challenges posed by this crisis. In this respect, we would like to offer a few ideas on our working methods. The last weeks have shown that we can make better

use of available digital technology to make for example the exchange of information and confidence building measures more transparent and more easily accessible.

Another reflection is on travel, meetings, reporting etc. All of us here wish to revert to our traditional format of physical meetings. But at the same time, we see that digital platforms work and we should not shy away from utilising them even more effectively in the future, provided their security is guaranteed, for example in reporting from the field missions. In many cases, this would undoubtedly save time, money and CO₂ emissions.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and we look forward to the continuation of this discussion, including when looking at specific topics of our pol-mil agenda.

The Candidate Countries the REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA, MONTENEGRO, 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.

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