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Statement by the Head of the EU Delegation

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Vice-President of the Commission**

25th Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council Vienna, 6 December 2018

Ministers, dear friends,

Let me thank the Italian Chairmanship for their focus on dialogue inside the OSCE during these challenging times.

There is one simple idea that explains the creation of the OSCE, and its relevance for our continent today: the idea that we all share certain common principles, and that these principles are the foundation of security and cooperation in Europe.

Among these principles is the respect for every country's territorial integrity and political independence. The respect for international law and international agreements. And the commitment to avoid military confrontation and to promote disarmament.

These founding principles of the OSCE are still the main pathway to re-establishing trust among us and maintaining peace and security in Europe.

We have all agreed that violations of these principles could only have a negative impact on our collective security. Yet, we must acknowledge that such violations did and are still taking place in Europe. The recent events in the Sea of Azov are a reason for grave concern and represent another case where our common principles are being broken. A violation that comes as a consequence of Russia's illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and shows how dangerous is a path that brings us farther away from the common principles which all our countries defined together in the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter.

Our priority now is to restore security and cooperation in our region. So we call on all sides to show utmost restraint to de-escalate the situation immediately. We also urge Russia to release the captured vessels, their crew and equipment unconditionally and without delay. We expect Russia to ensure unhindered and free passage through the Kerch strait, in accordance with international law.

We also remain committed to promoting a sustainable political solution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine, in line with the founding principles of the OSCE – that is to say, with full

respect for Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity. We continue to call for the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements, and we have made clear that the so-called "elections" in the non-government controlled territories in eastern Ukraine are illegal and undermine the commitments taken under the Minsk agreements.

I would like to commend the work of the Special Monitoring Mission. The Union contributes to the mission with about two thirds of personnel and budget, and we demand that it enjoys full, safe and unconditional access throughout Ukraine in accordance with its mandate.

The EU will also continue to be strongly engaged in the peaceful resolution of the conflicts in Moldova, in Georgia and on Nagorno-Karabakh.

As you know, we are working on a daily basis for peace, security and reconciliation in the Balkans. In a difficult moment like this, the agreement between Skopje and Athens has given hope to an entire region. We also look with hope and encouragement to the progress of the Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina.

The European Union, just like the OSCE, has regional cooperation among its core goals. In this year we have invested particularly in cooperation with our Eastern Partners, agreeing on 20 concrete Deliverables for 2020, and we are stepping up our cooperation with Central Asia to an unprecedented level.

The founding documents of the OSCE also recognize that human rights and fundamental freedoms inside our societies are essential to our collective security. We strongly support the ongoing work on the safety of journalists, on tackling violence against women, and on the participation of women in political life.

We also welcome the Chairmanship's focus on increasing military transparency and risk reduction, the Mediterranean, the illicit trafficking in cultural property, tackling the return of foreign terrorist fighters, and economic and environmental issues. We hope that the final outcome of the Milan Ministerial will be balanced and significant

We, the European Union, still believe in the principles that led to the creation of the OSCE. We believe that they are still essential to guarantee security in Europe. And we will continue to work so that a spirit of cooperation can once again prevail on our continent.

Confrontation is not inevitable. It is always a political choice. It may be the easiest choice, but it is certainly not the best way to serve our citizens' interests and aspirations. In 1975, the leaders and the peoples of our continent understood that cooperation, not confrontation, would have provided peace, prosperity and security in our time.

That is still the right path – even after four decades, and even more in our difficult times.

Thank you.