

**28TH OSCE ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL FORUM
CONCLUDING MEETING
Prague, 10-11 September 2020**

**Welcome speech of H. E. Mr. Tomáš Petříček
Minister of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic**

Mr. Chairman,
Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my privilege to welcome you all to the Concluding Meeting of the 28th OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum. I am especially delighted to welcome the Head of the Albanian Chairmanship Acting Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Mr. Gent Cakaj and Acting OSCE Secretary General Ambassador Tuula Yrjölä.

This year's Forum is dedicated to "Promoting security, stability and economic growth in the OSCE area by preventing and combating corruption through innovation, increased transparency and digitalization".

Corruption poses a threat to security, development and democracy. It hampers competition and has a negative impact on distribution of resources in our economies. We shall prevent and combat corruption in a comprehensive way at all levels and ensure the involvement of civil society and the private sector. Corruption affects to a greater or lesser extent all the OSCE participating States including the Czech Republic. It is, therefore, necessary to strengthen the OSCE tools and commitments at the Ministerial Council in December in order to be able to fight this scourge more effectively.

The Second Preparatory Meeting that was held in blended format in June has demonstrated resiliency and flexibility of this Organization. Not only was the meeting attended by a record number of participants, but also the depth and quality of interactive discussions was outstanding. I applaud the OSCE and the Chairmanship for swiftly addressing the organizational and technical constraints caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic. The Forum remains a relevant platform for stimulating discussion and cooperation - in times when security and stability are needed more than before.

The social and economic implications of the pandemic have been truly devastating. While the Albanian Chairmanship could not have foreseen the crises, its determination to fight the corruption through innovation, increased transparency and digitalization was timely and right on target. The rise of global unemployment and corruption has already resulted in significant social and economic disruptions. With unprecedented government spending to support the economies that were effectively put on hold, the stakes to swiftly and transparently allocate the public funds to those that need it most are high.

The OSCE has been long advising to speed up the process of digitalisation. The companies that succeed in moving its business online are the ones that are most likely to benefit from the rapid change in consumer behaviour. The more comprehensive the process of digitalisation is, the more resilient the economies and public services become. Good governance, including widespread use of digital e-government platforms, might determine the pace of economic recovery in a particular country.

The pandemic has caused severe human suffering and economic disruptions. The virus does not stop at borders. It has exposed vulnerability of today's interconnected world, but it is a collective response that has the best chances to succeed in reopening the borders and reviving our economies and societies. International cooperation is, therefore, the most effective way to contain the virus and to emerge from the crises stronger.

The pandemic has however revealed a number of deep-seated problems that have been neglected in the past. Confidence among OSCE participating states has eroded due to violations of our fundamental principles. Let me state that the use of chemical weapons is completely unacceptable as it constitutes a serious breach of international law and international human rights standards. Impunity must not be tolerated. We must try harder to ensure that future generations will benefit from shared security and universal prosperity in the OSCE region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted that many of you were able to come to Prague, but we are equally grateful to those who joined in by videoconferencing. This is in fact the first high-level international conference in this Meeting Hall after the renovation that took place earlier this year. I sincerely apologise for any inconvenience caused by the measures, including social distancing, put in place in this building.

The Czech Republic seeks to contribute to progress in all dimensions of the OSCE. An important priority for us is the human dimension of the OSCE and the independent functioning of its institutions such as ODIHR or the Representative on Freedom of the Media. Since 2019, the Czech Republic has been chairing the OSCE Human Dimension Committee. As the chair, we have organised several debates on free access to information and functioning of independent media, which are important tools to fight corruption. We see the human dimension's importance especially now in the time of the crisis in Belarus. A real intro-Belorussian dialogue and political solution in line with OSCE principles is the only way to resolve the current situation. The Czech Republic pays special attention also to the OSCE's election observation missions. In our view, it is one of the best tools at our disposal to support democracy and democratic elections. We, therefore, support all deployed ODIHR missions by sending Czech election observers.

Finally, I would like to use this opportunity to express my gratitude to the 2020 Albanian OSCE Chairmanship and to the OSCE Documentation Centre in Prague for their support in organising this event. I wish you an inspiring debate over the next two days.