**Human Rights Council**

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**Statement**

**by**

**the Head of Delegation of the Republic of Albania**

**Deputy Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania**

**Mrs. Megi Fino**

**Honourable Mr. President,**

**Honourable Member states and observer states of the Human Rights Council,**

**Excellencies,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

At the outset, allow me to convey the deep appreciation of the Albanian Government for the invaluable work undertaken by the Human Rights Council.

We regard the review process under the Universal Periodic Review as an immense opportunity to highlight our progress, as well as to discuss together the challenges we have encountered in implementing the recommendations from the third cycle. Preparing for this review has proven to be a valuable exercise in assessing our current position, has enabled us to evaluate how effectively we are integrating human rights into our development policies and to recognize both our successes and the areas that require further attention. This reflective process has been crucial to ensure that we remain committed to advancing human rights in all facets of our governance and societal development.

In 2014, Albania established the Inter-institutional Working Group to enhance its commitment to human rights. This group brings together state administration institutions, independent national human rights institutions, the Assembly, the judiciary, and local government representatives, reflecting a comprehensive approach to addressing human rights issues and I am proud to chair this delegation today with members from some of these institutions.

The Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs coordinates the group’s efforts, identifying relevant institutions and gathering their contributions for national reports, by facilitating consultations among diverse stakeholders, while we strive to ensure that the reports are thorough and representative of various perspectives.

The report also actively consulted with civil society organizations, engaging non-profit organizations and experts who provided valuable insights. This collaboration ensures that the perspectives of those working directly with vulnerable communities are reflected in the report and enhancing the overall quality of the national report, simultaneously strengthening Albania's commitment to human rights.

**Excellencies,**

I would also like to express my appreciation to the countries that submitted advance questions, as this allows us to share additional information about the measures we are taking to further guarantee the respect and protection of human rights in Albania.

Since 2019, a series of measures have been implemented to improve the legal, political, and institutional framework, in line with human rights conventions and the specific recommendations from the third UPR cycle. Without further ado, allow me to delve into it in concrete terms:

# Justice system reform

Albania has successfully undergone a profound reform of the judicial system, resulting in a more independent, effective, and accountable judicial institutions. This judicial reform has had a direct impact on strengthening the rule of law, human rights, and the consolidation of democracy, thus noting a pivotal phase in the country's legal landscape.

Among the notable achievements is the approval of a new judicial map in 2022, aimed at enhancing the efficiency and accessibility of the judicial system.

Constitutional amendments have been made to extend the operational timeframe of the vetting bodies, ensuring that the processes crucial for maintaining judicial integrity continue without interruption. The appointment of 22 new prosecutors and 23 new judges in 2022, following their graduation from the School of Magistrates, reflects a commitment to inject fresh talent and perspectives into the judiciary.

Another key development is the approval of guidelines for a new Case Management System, spearheaded by the Information Technology Center. This initiative is expected to streamline case handling, making the judicial process more efficient and transparent.

Moreover, the Constitutional Court has successfully filled its vacant positions, restoring its full functionality.

Also, the Intersectoral Strategy for Juvenile Justice, approved in 2022, marks a significant step in promoting children's rights in Albania. Initiated by the Ministry of Justice, this document outlines a five-year plan aimed at creating a child-friendly justice system.

Moreover, through national plans for child protection, including the National Agenda for Children’s Rights 2021-2026, the National Youth Strategy, and the Action Plan, as well as the inter-sectoral strategy for juvenile justice 2022-2026 and its action plan, we are ensuring increased protection for children in accordance with international human rights standards.

**Mental Health**

The Ministry of Health and Social Protection has implemented various strategic measures to improve mental health and protect the rights of individuals with mental health disorders. The National Health Strategy 2021-2030 and its Action Plan, serve as the umbrella documents for this initiative.

The new Mental Health Action Plan, approved in September 2023, seeks to enhance mental health care for all citizens through integrated services, prevention, and increased awareness for vulnerable groups. The plan addresses health needs across all life stages, aims to empower individuals with mental disorders to live independently and it ensures that interventions are tailored to meet the specific needs of all genders.

**Gender equality and the empowerment of women**

The National Strategy on Gender Equality 2021-2030 is a comprehensive framework developed in collaboration with various stakeholders, including local governments, civil society organizations, and international entities, ensuring a broad-based approach to gender equality.

The National Strategy aims to advance gender equality in Albania by harmonizing domestic laws with international standards like CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention.

The strategy promotes equal opportunities for both women and men in various spheres of life, emphasizing their equal opportunity for participation in societal development. The process of revising the existing Law on Gender Equality in Society is underway to strengthen its provisions and ensure better implementation.

Moreover**,** gender integration is implemented through the joint work of ministries and municipalities at the local level, through the role of gender officers in these institutions. There are 11 gender officers in line ministries, 1 gender contact point in the National Institute of Statistics and 1 gender contact point in the State Police at the central level, and 61 officers and/or local coordinators against domestic violence in 61 municipalities.

Strengthening capacities of the network of gender officials in line ministries and municipalities through gender concepts, training for gender analysis and gender budgeting are the focus of our efforts to strengthen the state gender mechanism. In cooperation with the Department of Public Administration with the support of UN WOMEN in Albania, gender officials in ministries and municipalities are trained on gender integration and responsive gender budgeting with an emphasis on gender sensitive indicators, using unified methodologies.

**Domestic and gender-based violence**

Albania’s initiatives for the enactment of criminal and civil laws addressing domestic violence continue to yield results.

The National Referral Mechanism is a coordinated network of institutions at both central and local levels, dedicated to combating gender-based violence. This Mechanism plays a crucial role in preventing domestic violence, facilitating reporting, and ensuring effective referrals.

At both central and local levels, gender equality employees are integral to the Mechanism. As of now, there are 61 coordinators across all municipalities. Coordination among responsible authorities is detailed in sub-legal acts of the Law on Measures Against Violence in Family Relationships.

Additionally, the Law on Social Care Services aims to guarantee access to social services for women and girls, improving and establishing specialized services for victims of domestic violence, potential trafficking victims, and those facing various forms of abuse.

In 2019, the Social Fund Mechanism was established as a co-financing initiative to enhance collaboration and financial support from central to local government. This initiative aims to improve standards and administrative capacities, ensuring the sustainability of existing social care services and fostering the development of new services and social policies at the local level.

Support services for victims of gender-based violence include:

* A National Reception Center for victims and potential victims of domestic violence.
* Four new emergency-community-based services operating locally.
* One day center.
* Three shelters provided by NGOs.
* Two national helplines for children and women/girls facing various forms of abuse, assisting approximately 10,000 individuals.
* Three emergency response centers for child victims/survivors of sexual abuse and other severe violence, with one center serving all categories, located within regional hospital facilities.
* One shelter specifically for LGBTIQ+ individuals.

The new Strategy of Social Protection and its action plan for 2024-2030 reaffirms the Government's commitment to advancing social protection issues, focusing on increasing community-based services for women and girls and enhancing financial support for regional specialized services to ensure sustainable service provision.

In terms of capacity building, national meetings alongside local coordinators are organized. Thematic training sessions have also been conducted on the “Role of Coordinated Referral Mechanisms for Domestic Violence Prevention and Combating Digital Violence,” with participants from three crisis management centers focused on sexual violence.

**Rights of the Child**

Law "On the Rights and Protection of the Child" establishes comprehensive protections for children's rights and aligns with international standards, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The National Agenda for Children's Rights 2021-2026, adopted in 2021, was developed in consultation with various stakeholders, including children, civil society, and international organizations.

The Agenda reflects the voices of children through their participation and it is guided by the four general principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: non-discrimination, the best interest of the child, life, survival and development, and participation.

Furthermore, the Agenda aligns with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, specifically addressing SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 3 SDG 4, SDG 5, SDG 8, SDG 10, and SDG 16.

Through the Social Fund, municipal resources for social care have increased, and the Youth Guarantee program is successfully expanding opportunities for young people. A new Child Guarantee program is being developed to aid children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, with a focus on securing additional financial resources. These are some of the significant steps taken by the Government in this regard.

Albania’s efforts to reduce reliance on institutional care are evident, with a steady decrease in the number of children in residential facilities. Legal changes are being implemented as part of a new Social Protection Strategy to further improve the childcare system.

In education, progress has been made toward inclusive practices. In 2023, Albania aligned its Pre-university Law with international standards for inclusive education, initiating the transformation of special schools into resource centers. Support programs, including free textbooks for disadvantaged groups, continue to operate, and the number of qualified assistance teachers for children with disabilities is increasing. Nonetheless, further work is needed to ensure inclusive education for all children with disabilities, including in early childhood.

To address violence against children, a national strategy is in place. A network of Child Protection Workers operates in every municipality to manage cases of violence against children. The government has established two service centers for child victims of sexual violence, adhering to international standards. More security officers are now present on school premises. The government recognizes the need for further actions to fully resource and enhance the child protection system. We recognize the need for additional measures to ensure that the child protection system is adequately equipped to respond to all forms of violence against children. Therefore, we are dedicated to enhancing the child protection system by allocating sufficient financial and human resources.

A priority for us is child protection in the online environment. The State Agency for the Rights and Protection of Children and the National Authority for Cybersecurity have signed an inter-institutional agreement to safeguard children in cyberspace. From January to May 2024, four workshops training 135 professionals were conducted in several cities all over the country. Nine awareness activities were held for 460 children and 43 parents, and six additional awareness meetings engaged around 300 pupils in Tirana.

**Persons with disabilities**

Albania has made significant progress in aligning its national legislation with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, alongside the approval of the Law on Inclusion and Accessibility.

National Council of Disability, encompassing both government and civil society representatives, is established to ensure ensures a collaborative approach to policymaking. This council plays a vital role in advising on social inclusion and accessibility issues, allowing for diverse perspectives, especially from organizations representing persons with disabilities.

The National Action Plan on Disability 2021-2025 sets forth specific objectives that align with the Convention.

Albania’s intention to ratify the Optional Protocol of the CRPD by 2027, as outlined in the EU Roadmap, underscores its ongoing dedication to advancing the rights of persons with disabilities. Continued cooperation with civil society, international development partners, and other stakeholders will be essential for effective implementation and advocacy.

**Elderly persons**

Age discrimination is addressed in the Labour Code and the amended Law on Protection from Discrimination. Additionally, the amended Law on Measures Against Violence in Family Relations provides protections against abuse, focusing on vulnerable groups such as women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

To protect the rights and autonomy of the elderly, the National Policy Document on Ageing was implemented in 2019. The upcoming Strategic Document and New Aging Plan (2025-2030) will align with international UN standards on aging, ensuring continued progress in addressing non-discrimination and violence against older individuals.

The national social care system includes public residential institutions and 18 integrated public services at the district and municipal levels, offering multidisciplinary community services, day centers, mobile services, and home assistance to ensure no one is left behind.

Awareness campaigns aimed at promoting the rights of older individuals and combating discrimination are also key components of this initiative. Additionally, the infrastructure for healthcare has significantly improved, with access to 340 health centers, polyclinics, and hospitals. Free health check-ups are provided nationwide for individuals aged 35 to 70 to promote preventive care and healthy living, enhancing access to healthcare services for disadvantaged groups.

**LGBTIQ+ Rights**

Albania is implementing the National Action Plan for LGBTI Rights 2021-2027, aimed at raising awareness on equality, inclusion, and non-discrimination towards LGBTI+ people. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection actively participates in awareness campaigns, such as the annual International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia Campaign.

To support LGBTIQ+ individuals facing family exclusion or abuse, the "Shelter-Streheza" provides safe housing, psychosocial and legal assistance, and referrals to additional specialized services.

The law on Health Care in Albania guarantees that LGBTIQ+ individuals receive health care on par with other citizens. Simultaneously, workshops on elimination of discrimination against LGBTIQ+ individuals in the private sector are hosted by the government, in collaboration with UNDP and other partners, to promote workplace diversity.

The Ministry of Health and Social Protection established a working group to draft a Medical-Transgender Protocol. In April 2024, a meeting was held to present the Transgender Medical Protocol, attended by working group members, representatives from the transgender community, civil society organizations, and international partners. The drafting of guidelines for the Transgender Medical Protocol is currently underway.

**Rights of minorities**

The Albanian Government has approved the National Action Plan for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation of Roma and Egyptians for 2021-2025. In 2020, the Anti-Discrimination Act was amended to strengthen protections.

Financial measures are implemented, such as quotas for food in canteens and dormitories, along with scholarships for children from Roma and Egyptian backgrounds. The government collects data on minority children to enhance policies and services.

In terms of education, the Albanian law on pre-university education guarantees that members of national minorities have the right to learn and be taught in their mother tongue, alongside learning about their history and culture. Local education offices prioritize the enrollment and education of minority children and organize activities to promote their language, culture, and traditions. Notably, a Local Education Office was established in areas with a significant Greek minority presence.

Approximately 70% of subjects for Greek and Macedonian minority students in basic education are taught in their native language, with the remaining 30% in Albanian. All students from national minorities receive free textbooks from the state budget, and learning occurs in separate classes regardless of class size. The government also emphasizes professional development of minority teachers, ensuring they receive at least three days of training each year.

Referring to the labor market, the government, through enacted legislation has developed employment offices, which fulfill the right of all unemployed job seekers in the country, to receive vocational counseling and training and to receive income support.

Regarding housing, following the amendment of the law "On Social Housing", the Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation has continuously worked on the development of by-laws. Joint Instruction "On the way social housing programs interact with programs for social services, employment, education and health care" ensures full inclusion of the category of Roma families in social programs. In addition, the Law "On Social Housing Programs", stipulates that at least 5% of the beneficiaries of each social housing program must belong to the Roma minority.

**Trafficking of human beings**

The Albanian government prioritizes the fight against human trafficking, spearheaded by the Ministry of the Interior.

In July of this year, the Council of Ministers approved the National Action Plan for 2024-2025, which articulates the government's commitment to tackling human trafficking and safeguarding vulnerable populations, particularly women and children in line with Albania's international obligations, findings and recommendations from various international reports including the EU Progress Report, the Council of Europe Report, UNODC, and the US State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report.

One of the Plan's focal points involves equipping officers with the tools needed for proactive investigations, which can lead to timely identification of victims and the seizure of traffickers’ assets, as well as provide victims with comprehensive support tailored to their needs.

Public awareness campaigns educating communities are also a crucial part of the Action Plan, as they also engage civil society, businesses, and the media, in the fight against trafficking.

**Climate Change**

The Albanian government has made notable progress in addressing climate change, aligning its policies with European Union standards and global climate goals. A key achievement is the adoption of the National Energy and Climate Plan, while also strengthening our international commitments through the updated National Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement. Efforts to advance climate action also include the development of a national Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification (MRV) system to ensure transparency and accountability in emission reductions.

Albania is focusing on enhancing its National adaptation Plan through targeting vulnerable sectors like water management, agriculture, and biodiversity. We are also integrating gender mainstreaming and support for vulnerable groups into our climate policies. The government is actively working to ensure that women, who are often disproportionately affected by climate impacts, are included in decision-making processes and benefit from climate adaptation initiatives. Special attention is also given to rural communities, who face greater risks from climate-related disasters.

The National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy 2023-2030 coupled with the National Strategy for Social Protection 2024-2030 aims to address the links between disaster risks and social protection through targeted mitigation measures. Nonetheless, a pressing challenge for Albania is the integration of children's vulnerabilities and needs into climate, environmental, and disaster risk reduction policies, as well as the establishment of climate-resilient essential services for families and children. Through partnerships with international organizations like the Green Climate Fund, Albania aims to implement projects that build resilience among these vulnerable populations, ensuring that climate policies are inclusive and equitable.

**Excellencies,**

As we wrap up this Universal Periodic Review session, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all participants for their invaluable contributions. Your engagement reflects a profound commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights at both national and international levels.

The Albanian Government is firmly committed to the protection and promotion of human rights, recognizing it as a fundamental priority. In meeting its international obligations, Albania will continue to work towards enhancing the legal and policy framework on human rights. This involves increasing public awareness through educational initiatives and fostering collaboration among various stakeholders, including civil society, local communities, and international organizations.

Through these efforts and with your support, the government seeks to build a more equitable society, ensuring that every individual’s rights are upheld and respected.

Thank you!