Athens, 1st November 2021

**Opening Statement by H.E. Mr Panos Alexandris, Secretary General for Justice and Human Rights, Ministry of Justice of the Hellenic Republic**

Madam President,

Distinguished members of the UPR Working Group.

It is my honor to present to you today Greece’s Report during this third UPR cycle. The drafting of this Report has been **coordinated** by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in close **cooperation** with the relevant Ministries. Α draft has also been submitted to the **Greek National Commission for Human Rights**, our NHRI with Status A accreditation, where forty-two NGOs and other institutions active in the field of Human Rights protection, participate. The Commission’s views and comments were taken into consideration as part of an overall inclusive, transparent, and participatory process. Let me also stress that, under a recently adopted Law, the Commission has acquired legal personality, administrative and financial autonomy, while its functional independence and its composition have been further enhanced.

I will now present the most significant **recent developments** and **main challenges** faced by my country, as presented in our National Report. Let me assure you that this Delegation, which I have the honour to lead, will be participating in today’s Interactive Dialogue in an open and forthright approach. Of course, elaborating on the whole field of Human Rights is quite a laborious task, made even more challenging due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has affected us in unprecedented ways.

**Let me begin by noting that, since our last UPR meeting in 2016, Greece has been making important efforts to address the consequences of a very severe economic crisis,** which is now behind us, although the effects of past austerity measures are still felt today. As all countries across the world, Greece has been facing its own **tragic impact of the Covid-19** **pandemic;** we are counting more than 15,000 lives lost. In our sustained and multifaceted fight against the pandemic, vaccination is a most powerful and effective tool. Government Authorities, scientific experts and civil society organizations are deploying dedicated joint efforts to promote its benefits. More than 6 million persons living in Greece have already been fully vaccinated, bringing the percentage of the total population vaccinated to around 60%. It is essential that we all, from this distinguished forum as well, **express our sincere appreciation and gratitude to front-line workers and medical personnel** for their sacrifices and unabated dedication. I would like to note that, in my country, vaccines are cost-free and accessible to all, including vulnerable groups. In this respect, adequate vaccines have been made available to Reception and Identification Centers for people hosted there. In addition, an Action Plan for the vaccination of Roma population is underway. Let me also stress that **the restrictive measures which my country too was forced to take, in order to protect Public Health, were proportionate, non-discriminatory and adopted in full compliance with democratic and parliamentary processes.**

**It is our firm resolve to “build back better” and we have the political will and the tools to do so.** Our “National Recovery and Resilience Plan” has already been endorsed by the competent European Union Authorities. This plan prioritizes the following sectors: green transition, digital transformation, employment, skill and social cohesion, private investment and transformation of the economy. In relation to the still evolving energy crisis, Greece has already been pursuing suitable measures, with a view to assisting the most disadvantaged and marginalized persons.

It is our strong belief that financial constraints **cannot** be a pretext for shortcomings in Human Rights protection. In this respect, **Greece has been working on projects aiming to alleviating disparities which undermine civil, political, as well as economic and social rights**. Moreover, the **National Strategy for Social Integration and Poverty Reduction** has been elaborated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. During the reporting period, we have adopted three National Action Plans of major importance: The **first National Action Plan on the rights of Persons with Disabilities**, based on CRPD’s recommendations and with the full participation of the **National Confederation of Disabled People in Greece** was adopted last year. It is a comprehensive policy document, setting clear and measurable targets which place the State at the service of persons with disabilities. It aims at enhancing accessibility and participation in all aspects of life and creates the necessary synergies for further positive developments.

Moreover, the **National Council against Racism and Intolerance, which I have the honour to chair, has also adopted the first National Action Plan against Racism and Intolerance.** We have a robust legislative framework that punishes acts which could result in discrimination, hatred or violence against individuals or groups defined by references to race, colour, religion, national or ethnic origin, sexual orientation, gender-identity characteristics or disability. In addition, we have raised the minimum level of penalties imposed in cases of crimes which bear racist characteristics. We have improved data collection and strengthened the operational capability of Police responses. The Racist Violence Recording Network, comprising more than 50 NGOs, is a valuable independent partner in these efforts.

At this juncture, I would like to mention the **landmark judgment by the competent Criminal Court which convicted the leadership of the extremist right-wing political party “Golden Dawn” of directing a criminal organization**. It is noteworthy that the party had already been voted out of Parliament at the 2019 elections. We will continue working on responding to incidents of hate violence and hate speech and we will not allow the resurgence of such acts, which are being unequivocally condemned by the Authorities and the Greek people alike.

Moving now to another issue that is close to my heart, I would like to inform you that the **first** **National Action Plan on the Rights of the Child** was adopted just last June **by the National Mechanism that I preside**. Among other targets, it aims at combating child poverty, promoting a child-friendly justice system, protecting children on the move, ensuring children’s right to health and education, as well as promoting positive actions for children with disabilities.

In addition, last March, the Prime Minister of Greece supported the setting up of **a Committee to draft a National Strategy for the Equality of LGBTQI+ persons,** chaired by the former CERD Vice-Chairman and ex-President of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, Professor Sicilianos. The Committee published its report this June and I am confident that the implementation of relevant cross-sectoral actions and policies will contribute to the elimination of stereotypes and prejudices. Allow me, at this point, to pay tribute to a member of this Committee, the late Marina Galanou, a prominent defender of the rights of transgender persons, who has recently passed away.

Regarding **our policies against discrimination**, the **new** **National Roma Integration Strategy and Action Plan** is currently being elaborated by the General Secretariat for Social Solidarity and Fight against Poverty, of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The **National Strategy** is constructed on four pillars: 1) prevention and fight against poverty and social exclusion; 2) equal access to social services; 3) fight against stereotypes and discrimination; and lastly 4) promotion of Roma participation in the community.

Distinguished members of the Working Group,

**The Muslim minority in Thrace**, whose status was established by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, encompasses three distinct groups of Turkish, Pomak and Roma origin. Members of each of these groups have their own language, as well as their distinct heritage and cultural traditions. Their Muslim faith is their common attribute and what gives them the right to enjoy the provisions of the Lausanne Treaty for the protection of this particular minority. At the same time, Greece fully respects the principle of individual self-identification. However, **what** **cannot be accepted is any attempt to impose a sole collective identity on all the minority members, in disregard of the Treaty of Lausanne and the objective circumstances**. Persons belonging to the Muslim minority in Thrace actively participate in all aspects of everyday public, civil and political life, and are beneficiaries of specific advantageous measures, as well as of nationwide projects addressed in particular to women and youth.

On the related issue of **freedom of religion**, I would like to inform you that, in November last year, the Mosque in Athens began operating. It is benefiting from State subsidies for its operation and maintenance. Meanwhile, hundreds of **licensed worship places of different religious denominations**, both Christian and non-Christian, are freely functioning. Greece is also very active, domestically and abroad, on the effort to **combat anti-Semitism**. The General Secretariat for Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Education has undertaken numerous initiatives in this field. Since last April, **Greece is holding the Chairmanship of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance** and organizes various academic, educational and cultural activities. A Special Envoy on Combating Antisemitism and preserving Holocaust Remembrance was appointed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while in November 2019, the Prime Minister officially announced the adoption by Greece of the Working Definition on Anti-Semitism.

On **combating domestic violence, which –as in many other countries- has been exacerbated during lockdowns due to the pandemic, I would like to inform you that Greece has ratified the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention.** The General Secretariat for Demography, Family Policy and Gender Equality of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is operating a number of dedicated structures across the country for the prevention and treatment of victims of domestic violence, as well as relevant helplines. Moreover, a significant number of domestic-violence-response units are already operational within the Hellenic Police.

In our work towards **promoting gender equality and closing existing gaps, the National Action Plan on Gender Equality** is at the final stages of its drafting, and in alignment with relevant priorities of the European Union and the United Nations. In this respect, strong emphasis is placed on **combating multiple forms of discrimination**. Furthermore, the **``Me-too``** movement has contributed, in my country as well, to “breaking the silence”, empowering victims and holding perpetrators accountable. Addressing civil society concerns, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs promoted the ratification of the “ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work”, making Greece the 1st EU member state and one of the 8 other ILO members to have done so. We have also finalized the **first National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security**, in implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of 2000.

As far as **Trafficking in Human Beings** is concerned, the new Criminal Code consolidated the relevant law provisions and introduced harsher penalties for perpetrators. In 2019, the **National Referral Mechanism** was launched, while the **Office of the National Rapporteur** at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is supervising its work. The Office of the National Rapporteur has also drafted a **National Action Plan on Human Trafficking** incorporating a wide range of relevant policy-making projects. Last July, the Minister of Citizen Protection and the National Rapporteur launched the Ministry’s **Strategy against Trafficking in Human Beings**. In this light, it should be noted that considerable progress has been achieved in identifying possible victims of trafficking at Reception and Identification Centres among migrants and asylum-seekers. Moreover, the new Criminal Code has extended the definition of the legal notion of “exploitation” to include labour exploitation and servitude-like practices, the fight against which will continue unabated.

On a related issue, **that of migration flows, which -with doubt- highly interests countries of origin, transit, and destination alike, I would like to underline the significant progress achieved since our last UPR meeting back in 2016.** During our own history, the Greek people have known themselves what it means to be a refugee and a migrant. Following the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, however, Greece has received **unprecedented numbers** of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers; and arrivals are still continuing. What **we cannot accept though, is the inhumane politicization of people in need, as we experienced at our Eastern borders in March 2020**; **we condemn the cruel instrumentalization of human beings, where persons are turned into tools of political pressure;** we will not allow this to happen. It is immoral and it goes against the spirit and the letter of the **1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees**. Greece, with the vital assistance of International Organizations, such as **UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF, and the ICRC,** as well as the **Greek Red Cross Society** and in collaboration with various NGOs, has assisted huge numbers of innocent victims of war, persecution or trafficking. The **financial support of the European Union** in this respect has been vital and we would like to express our appreciation to the European Commission as well as FRONTEX and EASO for their support. Currently, we are witnessing a considerable decrease in the number of new arrivals, the significant decongestion of Reception and Identification Centers at the Aegean islands, a marked improvement in reception conditions, an increased number of relocations and transfers to the mainland, and an acceleration of asylum procedures. New Multipurpose Reception and Identification Centres have become operational, while, at the same time, special attention and care has been awarded to the protection of **unaccompanied minors as a matter of priority**. As a next step, **integration of recognized refugees** is a huge undertaking to which the Government is dedicating considerable human and budgetary resources. However, **additional solidarity and international burden-and-responsibility sharing are needed**.

I would like, at this point, to stress that Greece, as every other country around the world, has **the right, the responsibility and** **the obligation to protect its borders, which are also European Union borders,** in compliance with international law**.** The Hellenic Coast Guard has been, and continues to save lives at sea and to carry out search and rescue operations, as provided for in the **UNCLOS** and other relevant Conventions, while Police Personnel has saved hundreds of lives at our land borders. Police and Coast Guard Services, in close cooperation, where relevant, with FRONTEX, **are** **addressing alleged violations of Human Rights at the borders, and administrative investigations are also conducted**.

Madam President,

I would like at this point to highlight the work of the Greek Ombudsman as the **National Investigation Mechanism for incidents of arbitrariness by law enforcement personnel and prison officers**. On the issue of **overcrowding of** **detention facilities,** the General Secretariat for anti-crime Policy is considering to further extend the use of alternative measures, such as those of community work and electronic monitoring.

Furthermore, **freedom of speech and freedom of expression** are fully protected in Greece; we also address the issue of **media freedom and that of safety of journalists** with particular care, making every possible effort to defend everyone’s right to be fully informed, which forms part of a well-functioning and active democratic society.

Madam President,

I believe I have provided you with a brief synopsis of our National Report, and we stand ready to listen to the recommendations of UN member states and to respond to the questions of the distinguished members of the UPR Working Group. Before closing, I would like to also thank those states that have provided their questions in advance.

Madam President, I thank you.

END of opening statement, the floor back to Geneva

**Closing remarks by H.E. Mr Panos Alexandris, Secretary General for Justice and Human Rights, Ministry of Justice**

I would like to deeply thank the distinguished members of the Working Group for their constructive questions and recommendations. It has been a very enriching experience which will inform our further endeavors in the field of Human Rights promotion and protection. We will examine **very carefully and in a positive spirit** all recommendations submitted and **will inform, at a later stage, this Working Group about the outcome of our review.** I firmly believe that the comprehensive follow-up to the UPR is a vital step in order to ensure that this Mechanism does, indeed, make a real difference. Greece will **also be submitting a voluntary mid-term progress report** on the implementation of the accepted recommendations, as we have been doing in the context of the previous two cycles. Allow me, in closing, to express my appreciation to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum for hosting us today [and to all the members of my Delegation for their work and commitment].

Thank you all for your attention.