Madam Vice-President,

Distinguished representatives of Member States,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

* I would like to thank you for the opportunity to present the most significant developments in the field of social policy and to express my sincere appreciation to everyone engaging in such constructive exchanges.
* Lithuania is on the same path with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals and the European Union social policy towards reducing inequality, poverty and social exclusion as well as ensuring gender equality, common values and employment.
* We have carefully analysed the questions of social domain prepared ahead by the distinguished delegations of Belgium, Panama, Spain and Sweden. We share the concerns raised with respect to violence against women and domestic violence, equal pay, social inclusion of the elderly and other groups. Let me assure that Lithuania has been taking the necessary measures to improve full participation of individuals and groups in our society.
* I am glad to note that social policy in Lithuania has been shifting from fragmented to more sustainable, inclusive and better targeted for individual needs. To illustrate this point, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour prepared five long-term development programs within the framework of the National Progress Plan, specifically targeted for the most serious challenges in our society: 1) reducing income inequality, 2) reducing social exclusion, 3) inclusive labour market, 4) family policy and 5) adapting the environment for the disabled.
* Comprehensive policy action was taken in the past few years. To name a few, old age pensions were indexed and linked to wage changes in the economy. The system of unemployment benefits was reformed, broadening coverage and prolonging the length of assistance. An annually-variable minimal consumption needs level was established and is linked to basic social indicators. A universal child benefit scheme was introduced, allowing low-income earners to fully benefit from child support. These reforms increased the adequacy of key cash benefits, especially for families, while strengthening incentives to work and making labour market more flexible.
* Lithuania is further addressing policy reforms to tackle poverty and increase social welfare and inclusion of citizens. In 2022, all pensions have increased on average by about 11%. Single people of retirement age and the disabled will receive single person benefit which will be granted automatically without any application procedure. There is one of the most significant minimum wage increases in a decade by almost 14 %. In addition, we are developing different measures to ensure availability and quality of social services. For instance, we are putting effort to ensure stable financing and quality services provision in children's day care centres by introducing accreditation system.
* To narrow the disability employment gap, Lithuania has developed a new model of employment of persons with disabilities in the open labour market. Funding is allocated for adjustment and improvement of workplaces and work environment. Special attention will be paid to retain employment of persons who become disabled for the first time. The pilot job carving project will be implemented offering organisations a disabled workforce.
* Adapting the environment to make it less handicapping and closing digital divide gap is a significant part of our reforms. The Ministry developed a long-term program which aims to create disability-friendly environment in all areas of life for persons with disabilities including access to the necessary facilities and digital information.
* Technical aids are essential for integration of persons with disabilities and promoting disability-inclusive education. The state has planned financial resources (EUR 3.7 million) for compensation for all the costs of the technical aids acquisition. A pilot mobile teams project has been recently launched to support the integration of people with movement, hearing, vision, communication or sensory impairments. The specialists of these teams will arrive directly to the place of residence of a child or an adult with a disability and provide support with technical aids acquisition and adoption.
* With the acceleration of the aging process, personal dignity and support for the elderly has attracted more and more attention in Lithuania. Since 2014, Lithuania has been undergoing major institutional care transformation reform which aims to create a coherent and coordinated system of support and services that enables every child with a disability left without parental care or a disabled person to receive individual services and assistance and to participate in community life. Seeking to manage the virus outbreak, especially in large care facilities, and aiming to achieve a higher quality of care services for elderly and respect their private life based on individual needs, we optimised the living conditions.
* Lithuania puts a lot effort to protect the rights of the child. The centralized child rights protection system obliges to react to the reports on possible violations of the child rights 24/7. We give special attention to the elimination of corporal punishment and violent ways of upbringing. Over 36 million EUR have been allocated to projects that are under implementation in all municipalities of Lithuania. In close cooperation with NGOs, we support families through integrated services such as trainings on positive parenting, psychological counselling and pre-school education of children.
* 2022 has been announced as the Lithuanian Year of Youth which also marks anniversaries of the founding of the Council of Lithuanian Youth Organizations and the World Lithuanian Youth Union. The historical contribution of these organizations to the unification of Lithuanian youth in the country and in the world as well as in the formation of youth policy deserves the appreciation.
* I am particularly happy to note that the Lithuanian women are not only actively involved in political leadership but also contribute to high-value economy creation. For instance, Women Go Tech, a Lithuanian mentorship scheme that focuses on female retraining towards tech, receives the growing interest from women. According to the latest research, the Lithuanian biotechnology sector employs more women than men, but there are very few female executives. At least one woman works in a quarter of start-ups operating in Lithuania but only four percent of companies in this field are run by women. Both business and the public sector should work hand in hand to support further women’s empowerment.
* Measures to close the gender pay gap have been implemented including law amendments. Employers have certain legal obligations to approve pay systems and make available to all employees. The remuneration system shall avoid any discrimination on grounds of gender. The Social Security Fund now publishes gender-differentiated earnings of enterprises. According to its data, there are over 6 thousand companies in Lithuania where men earn more than women and over 4 thousand companies where women earn more than men. In all cases, the employer must prove that there was no discrimination. There are administrative penalties for breaches of the equal opportunities and employment law.
* The State Labour Inspectorate plays an important role in the supervision of compliance with the principles of non-discrimination and equal opportunities in all entities through consultations, inspections, and publication of information on labour disputes regarding violations of equal opportunities.
* Despite a comprehensive legal framework, the problem of domestic violence remains present in Lithuania. The recent legal amendments introducing a protection order against domestic violence are targeted at better protection of the person at risk of violence and more urgent separation from the abusive partner or relative. The National Programme has been developed to support preventive work against domestic violence and provide assistance to victims.
* By concluding, I would like to stress that Lithuania is committed to further promote and invest in comprehensive social policy strategies which ensure support for the most vulnerable groups in society through better addressing their individual needs. Dialogue with social partners is the key tool for developing innovative social policies, so we will continue on discussing changes with employees, the business community and non-governmental organizations. Thank you.