**Opening statement by the Head of the Lithuanian Delegation**

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**at the 40th session of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations Human Rights Council**

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Mr. President, Distinguished Representatives, Ladies and Gentleman,

I am honoured to present the third national report of the Republic of Lithuania.

Lithuania has been an active member state of the United Nations for 30 years and has committed itself to the active defence of human rights and cooperation with countries and civil society around the world. As a member of the UN Human Rights Council for the term of 2022-2024, Lithuania is devoted to the principle of universality and indivisibility of human rights and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms globally.

As a state party to major human rights treaties, Lithuania undertakes decisive steps to further improvement of human rights situation, with particular attention given to the implementation of recommendations received during the UPR and UN human rights protection mechanisms.

Honourable Delegates, Members of the Civil Society,

At the outset, let me express our gratitude to Sweden, United Kingdom, Panama, Belgium and Spain for submitting questions in advance. I will now turn to the central elements of the report. Members of the delegation will join me in providing in-depth information on the issues concerned.

First and foremost, in 2017, the Seimas Ombudsperson's Office was accredited as the National Human Rights Institution under the Paris Principles at A level. the funding has been steadily increasing, it is our commitment to strengthen the capacities of the Office to ensure the effective fulfilment of its mandate. This also applies to the Office of the Ombudsperson for Equal Opportunities and the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children Rights.

In addressing regulatory changes and policy instruments, I would like to note that social policy and human rights are at the pivot of a new **National Progress Plan 2021-2030.** It sets out horizontal principles of equal opportunities and gender equality as the main criteria in achieving goals of the program.

Let me start with the **protection of children’s rights**, whichis among the main priorities of Lithuania as a member of the UN Human Rights Council. Country is progressing with a child protection system reform. Its fundamental elements include a complete prohibition of all forms of violence against the child, a transition from institutional care to family and community-based services and centralization. NGOs are also involved. The ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child is approaching.

We put efforts to advance the **inclusivity of youth**. Lithuania intensifies participation in the Youth Delegate Programme, coordinated by the UN Programme on Youth. Our parliament considers the constitutional amendment on lowering the election age to the parliament from 25 to 21.

**Gender equality and non-discrimination** are the issues of particular importance for us. According to the WEF Global Gender Gap Report 2021, Lithuania is among five most-improved countries. Following the elections in 2020, women hold the positions both, the Speaker of Seimas and the Prime Minister. Six out of fourteen ministers are women. In 2021, women were appointed to the positions of the President of the Constitutional Court and the Prosecutor General for the first time in history. Women head offices of the Seimas Ombudsperson and specialised Ombudspersons for equal opportunities and children rights. Lithuania for the first time was elected to the Executive Board of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women for 2020-2022. Referring to Panama’s question on gender pay gap, the improvements of legislation are under consideration by the respective Ministry. The statistics of wage averages by gender were made public. The,,Gender Equality Ruler” tool, developed by the Ombudsperson for Equal Opportunities, aims to provide support for organizations in assessing the gender equality status. We are considering ratifying the ILO Convention on the Elimination of Violence and Harassment at Work.

Referring to the questions of Sweden and Belgium on measures taken to **prevent domestic violence**, allow me to highlight that joined efforts resulted in a significant change of an attitude, no longer considering it to be a private matter. The Law on Protection against Domestic Violence together with the ,,protection order” rule, as a remedy for operative separation of a person at risk of violence from the abusive partner or relative, serve for better protection of victims. Additional funding allocated to strengthen emotional, psychological and counselling assistance. In addressing this problem, a respective National Program, including information campaigns, trainings for employees, teachers, police officers, health care professionals, was launched. An illegal persecution of person criminalized in 2021, with the aim to ensure a greater protection of private life, also serving as a preventive measure. Lithuania will continue a zero-tolerance policy in this respect. In addition, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention remains on the political agenda, making efforts to address the concerns of some members of the society on sensitivities of the gender-related language in the document.

Regarding the **rights of persons with disabilities**,our activities are guided to a major social integration. In recent years, the policy of social integration has significantly changed from support towards the capacity building and promotion of independent living. The Action Plan on Social Integration of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2023 sets out provisions on more accessible education, health care and rehabilitation, independent living skills development, social services, education, employment, culture, sports, recreation and family life, in conformity with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. A personal assistant service program provides greater opportunities of studies, work, social services for about 1 500 persons each year. As 30 percent of persons with disabilities are employed, a new model is designed to increase the employment rate. Lithuania joined the WHO ,,Quality Rights” program, aiming to change mind-sets and practices and to improve lives of people with disabilities.

Lithuania is among few EU countries that has adopted a cross-sectoral plan to manage negative effects of COVID-19 on **mental health**. Already six months since the beginning of the pandemic new psychological support services were rolled out across the country to alleviate the effects on mental health. We managed to transform primary mental healthcare services with full spectrum of distant services, including the consultations by psychiatrists and psychologists.

Concerning the **integration of national minorities**, Lithuania has developed an efficient institutional structure, involving national minorities in policymaking.  A new Law on National Minorities is drafted by the Ministry of Justice. In answering the question of Spain, I would name multiple strategies and programmes aiming to reduce stereotypes towards Roma community. Roma community is supported by the Roma Community Centre and Roma NGOs, acting to improve integration. Let me conclude this issue with the new Law on Writing First Names and Surnames in Documents, expanding the right of national minorities to write their names in original language.

Moving to the **migration**, I refer to the question submitted in advance by the distinguished delegation of the United Kingdom, relating to the response of the Government of Lithuania to the instrumentalization of migration by the Belarusian regime. I would like to emphasize that Lithuania has faced a large-scale hybrid attack organised by the Belarussian regime. It is encouraging and/or forcing third-country nationals to cross illegally the border from Belarus to Lithuania/EU. These acts are conducted in retaliation for our support to Belarusians struggling for freedom, and in response to the EU sanctions imposed for harsh violations of human rights in Belarus. As a result, the illegal crossing of border increased almost 60 times in 2021. Lithuania was compelled to declare an emergency situation. Ultimately, we managed to overcome these challenges and stabilize the situation. Decisive element in shaping our response was excellent cooperation with NGOs, EU members, agencies, international and humanitarian organizations, namely Frontex, EASO, UNHCR.

A number of delegations, namely Sweden, United Kingdom, Belgium, held concerns on **hate crime and non-discrimination**. The Law on Equal Treatment includes gender, race, nationality, citizenship, language, origin, social status, religion, beliefs or opinions, age, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, religion among the prohibited grounds of discrimination. Under the Criminal Code, an act committed in order to express hatred against a group of persons or a person belonging to it on grounds named above is considered to be committed in aggravating circumstances. In addition, joint trainings were provided for police officers, prosecutors, judges, to strengthen their capacities in recognizing hate crimes and hate speech, to improve investigation, prosecution and ensure adequate punishment, and to respond the needs of victims. The Prosecutor General has introduced respective recommendations. Statistics show the increase of hate crime cases in courts. In addressing Sweden’s question, measures taken in response to the European Court of Human Rights judgement in case *Beizaras and Levickas*, were assessed by the Committee of Ministers of Council of Europe to be sufficient for a transmittal of the case to a standard supervision.

Allow me to elaborate on the issue of **imprisonment and alternative measures**, in response to question of Spain.Lately relevant legislative amendments were adopted for wider use of suspension of sentence, conditional release and sentences alternative to imprisonment. As a result, since 2018 a total number of inmates has decreased by additional 21 percent since; numbers of applications for conditional release have doubled. Currently, 48 percent of releases are on the conditional basis.

I am happy to share that during the consideration of the fourth periodic report in November 2021, the UN Committee against Torture commended our efforts to combat **human trafficking**, including the extension criminal liability, wide range of training activities and the Inter-institutional Action Plan on Combating Human Trafficking 2020–2022.

Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates, Members of the Civil Society,

COVID-19 related state of emergencies and human rights restrictions have raised new concerns to be solved during the post pandemic recovery. Some of the issues to be addressed were already mentioned: prevention of domestic violence and violence against women, gender equality, non-discrimination, development of criminal justice system. In addition, Lithuania is committed to grant full enjoyment of rights to the same-sex partners. In this regard, I would like to refer to the decision, adopted in 2019 by our Constitutional Court, stating that constitutional concept of the family is neutral in terms of gender.

In conclusion, allow me to thank you for your attention. We look forward to a constructive dialogue, being confident that it will serve as a valuable contribution to the domestic debate and all your comments and recommendations will be carefully analysed.

I thank you.