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Speech of Kakha Kaladze, Mayor of Tbilisi, Georgia

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

In these trying times, when the whole world faces the new challenge - the pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus, solidarity is of uttermost importance. Only with great civil responsibility, on one hand and a well-coordinated work of relevant agencies, on the other, can we end this pandemic fast, with minimum loss.

It is because of this virus that this conference had to go on-line. But as the topic of democracy and a dialogue between the government and people are always crucial, however dire the situation might be, it is a great honour for Tbilisi to co-organise this conference with the Council of Europe under the Georgian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, where one of the most important elements of democracy – civil participation in decision-making – is being discussed.

As democracy evolves, the level of diversity of citizens' needs and desires grows and thus, a consensus is reached with more difficulty. Bearing this in mind, we can consider civil participation as one response to this challenge. For example, citizens have very concrete ideas about how the park that the City Hall is arranging in their district must look like. They have specific demands about what this park should have – playground for children, off-leash dog areas, mini-football field and they can even name the species of trees they want to see there. Their desires can be satisfied only if they co-design this park.

The continuous participation of civil society and citizens is important for the democracy to work and it lays the foundation for a public dialogue on critical matters.

Speaking about civil participation in Tbilisi, first, we need to mention that Tbilisi is part of the Open Government Partnership programme and the Tbilisi City Hall actively takes measures for more transparency and openness. Open Government Partnership Action Plan for 2018-2020 features 5 commitments. They are related to access to information, public service reform, citizen feedback and citizen participation, including, in budgeting. After we fulfil these commitments, Tbilisi will start working on an even more ambitious action plan. Of course, in order to achieve this, we have a close cooperation with our international partners – international organisations and cities with successful experience.

An example of such cooperation is with the Council of Europe, when we created a citizen engagement platform in Tbilisi with an aim to engage local citizens into designing public spaces and to make this process transparent. This platform, based on the principle of parity brings together representatives from the local government and non-governmental

organisations and works successfully on a pilot project to turn one abandoned public space in Tbilisi into a recreational space. This project is being discussed on panels of this conference in greater details; however, I would like to note that this is a very important direction for us.

Environmental protection is one of the pressing challenges for our capital and addressing it is our priority. Therefore, I am glad that this platform has been created and citizens, experts, non-governmental organisations have the opportunity to engage in the decision-making that, primarily, affects their lives.

We have some elements of public participation in Tbilisi. At this conference there are participants from local, regional and central governments willing to share their best practices that demonstrate, on one hand, the impact that civil participation has on the final success of the governance which is directly linked to the well-being of the citizens and on the other hand, the practices that work. Therefore, this conference, in line with the priorities set by the Georgian Presidency, is a good way for the participants to get new ideas of democratic governance and find effective solutions to existing challenges.

I would like to thank the Council of Europe and the Permanent Representation of Georgia, for their invaluable support. I believe the conference will result in fruitful exchanges for everyone. I wish you all good health, peace and every success in all your endeavours.