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Speech of Natia Mezvrishvili, Head of Administration of the Government of Georgia

As the world grapples with a new pandemic, change has become the most common word of our being. Lockdowns and states of emergencies became business as usual ; working remotely – normally rare - today is a necessity; the Governments' main focus was shifted to ensuring the full capacity of health systems, as it is the only guarantee to save what is at the core today – the lives of our citizens.

The extent of the impact of the outbreak is still being assessed with a clear probability of outrageous economic damage – already compared to the fallout of the Great Depression. The crisis affects and becomes a daily burden for all – businesses and families, workers, persons with disabilities and youth, young parents and elderly, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and minorities, heroes working at the frontlines - to name a few. Pandemic 2020 has changed something for all.

Notwithstanding the change in all our realities, our values remain unaltered. Thus, protection of human rights continues to be of paramount importance during the crisis, especially civil participation among them, being as relevant today as it was before the new normal.

With this considered, I would like to share Georgia's experience of establishing permanent dialogue mechanisms for the government and civil society organizations (CSOs) to co-create open government reforms. It is noteworthy that redesigning these mechanisms, at least temporarily, with the aim to ensure "Open Response, Open Recovery" is currently being discussed and I am hopeful to share success story on this later as well.

Georgia was among the first countries to join the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in 2012 – a multilateral international initiative that aims to secure concrete commitments from governments to promote open and accountable governance, civic engagement, and innovation. Georgia served as a member of the OGP Steering Committee in 2014-2016 and led the Partnership as the Chair country in 2018. In 2019 Georgia was once again trusted and elected as a member of the Steering Committee for 3 years term, bearing significant opportunities and responsibilities for our country.

To translate the most important principle of civil participation into practice, the first permanent multi-stakeholder platform – the Open Government Georgia's Forum – was established in 2014 with the leadership of the Ministry of Justice of Georgia. The latter invited government agencies, local and international organizations to co-create country's open government agenda.

Since then Georgia has implemented four Open Government Action Plans and achieved tangible results such as establishing the first official e-petitions portal of the Government, improving transparency of state procurement, transforming the field of public service delivery, establishing innovative practice of monitoring the State Budget with citizen participation or reforming the concept of civil service.

Regardless of a good practice, CSOs that actively contributed to OGP Georgia's success called on the Government to refresh its approaches and take co-creation to a higher level.

In spring 2019, the Administration of the Government of Georgia took leadership of OGP Georgia's coordination, reporting directly to the Prime Minister. As the next step, we have launched intensive consultations with CSOs to identify challenges that might have hindered progress in the field of open government.

As a result of honest discussion about shortcomings encountered, we have set three key policy objectives for a new phase of OGP Georgia:

- Increase senior-level executives' degree of involvement in developing and monitoring open government reforms;
- Enhance civil society's role in decision-making related to the country's open government policy and
- Escalate ambition of open government reforms.

To ensure a robust approach to the first two policy objectives, the first high-level decision-making and deliberative body of the Cabinet – the Open Government Inter-Agency Coordination Council (the OGP Council) was established. The Council consists of all deputy ministers/state ministers, heads of LEPLs, and representatives of CSOs with a right to vote. Decision of the Council requires a majority of votes of the permanent members representing public institutions and majority of votes of the permanent members representing CSOs. Additionally, the decision on accepting new civil society organizations are made solely by the Forum member CSOs, without interference from the public institutions or the OGP Georgia's Secretariat. The Council is chaired by the Head of Administration of the Government and co-chaired by the CSOs representative (elected by the CSOs for the term of the action plan, on a rotating basis).

With this arrangement of equal opportunities, we have created a solid ground for meaningful participation, however, the impact of the latter on escalating ambition of future open government reforms will be evaluated at the later stage. On the other hand, it is obvious that this setting will need to be adaptable to the new reality and changes the crisis has brought thus far.

Drastic transformation of issues the world is facing today will cause alterations in various directions and we are confident that most of the Open Government Action Plans will be Plans of Open Recovery, however, open response during the crisis will also define the trust between the government and citizens. Governments might need to take emergency decisions, but as stated by the Prime Minister of Georgia on May 4th, this does not allow us to weaken accountability and restrict the right of citizens to be well-informed.

Hence, now it is time for those of us that share the fundamental values of democracy, openness and civil space to come together and ensure that open government delivers meaningful change to people's lives during and post-pandemic crisis.

Sincerely,