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Hellenic Republic: *Voluntary National Review on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development*, High-level Political Forum on sustainable development, July 2018

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The progress made in implementing Agenda 2030 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is being reviewed in the High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF), which meets under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (annually) and the General Assembly (every four years). Greece participated for the first time in the HLPF of July 2018, presenting her Voluntary National Review (VNR) on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The 156-page VNR Report (i) presented the institutional mechanism put in place in Greece, which aims to ensure the collective political ownership and commitment in accomplishing successfully the SDGs and in fostering a whole-of-government approach; (ii) highlighted the national policy and legal framework incorporating the SDGs and focusing on the national priorities for the SDGs; (iii) showcased the role played by key stakeholders in the implementation of the SDGs, through the adoption of a whole-of-society approach; (iv) provided some keys means of implementation for a comprehensive and integrated achievement of the SDGs at all governance levels; and (v) presented the main steps to be taken with regard to the follow up and review process of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

As it is stated in the VNR Report, Greece is strongly committed to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 SDGs, as they provide an ambitious, visionary and transformative framework for a new, equitable and sustainable development path. Ensuring that “no one is left behind” is a high political priority for Greece, as the country is exiting a period of prolonged economic crisis. Greece’s utmost objective is to reap the full benefits that the SDGs provide in order to reframe the country’s development perspectives. The “SDGs lens” can shape policies to achieve a balance between economic development, social cohesion and protection of the environment and of natural resources. Fulfilling the vision for a fair, equitable and sustainable development for all, for present and for future generations, along with achieving the SDGs, necessitate the adoption of strategic priorities and streamlined policies in all sectors, tailored to the specific national context and needs. Greece endorsed in 2017 at the highest political level and through a wide social dialogue, a set of eight overarching National Priorities for the SDGs, which are also in line with the National Growth Strategy adopted by the Greek government in 2018. The Strategy aims at reinvigorating the Greek economy, promoting social well-being and justice without exclusions, ensuring environmental protection and safeguarding the country’s unique ecological wealth. The eight Greek National Priorities for the SDGs encompass all 17 SDGs, and reflect, in a balanced and integrated manner, the three dimensions of sustainable development. They include:

- Fostering a competitive, innovative and sustainable economic growth (linked to SDGs 9, 8)
- Promoting full employment and decent work for all (linked to SDG 8)

- Addressing poverty and social exclusion, and providing universal access to quality health care services (linked to SDGs 1, 2, 3)
- Reducing social and regional inequalities and ensuring equal opportunities for all (linked to SDGs 5, 10)
- Providing high-quality and inclusive education (linked to SDG 4)
- Strengthening the protection and sustainable management of natural capital as a basis for social prosperity and transition to a low-carbon economy (linked to SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15)
- Building effective, accountable and transparent institutions (linked to SDGs 16, 17)
- Enhancing open, participatory, democratic processes and promoting partnerships (linked to SDGs 16, 17).

The vision of sustainable development for Greece is not a recent endeavour. The effort was initiated with the country's first National Strategy for Sustainable Development, in 2002. However, it is now that Greece has adopted a truly strategic approach, where sustainable development issues are anchored at the highest political level. In turn, this ensures collective political ownership and commitment to the successful achievement of the SDGs. Policy coherence is pursued both "horizontally" across policy sectors, including the agricultural, tourism and cultural sector, and "vertically" at all levels of governance, from national to local. Based on the fact that the implementation of the SDGs goes beyond the responsibilities of the central government, Greece has adopted a "whole-of-society" approach, giving particular attention to ensuring strong stakeholder engagement from the stock-taking to policy design and implementation stages, and to awareness raising at all levels.

Among Greece's key successes with regard to the implementation of the SDGs at the national level, is the set-up of a robust long-term institutional mechanism encompassing a "whole-of-government" approach. This includes, inter alia, an active operational Inter-ministerial Coordination Network, steered by the General Secretariat of the Government (Office of Coordination, Institutional, International & European Affairs), a key centre-of-government entity, appointed to lead and coordinate national efforts for the achievement of the SDGs with a long-term perspective.

In order to define the national starting point and measure the distance for achieving the various SDG targets, Greece undertook for the first time an in-depth stock-taking exercise to track and evaluate the current state as well as progress. In this framework, a detailed mapping of all national policies and of the corresponding legal frameworks relevant to the SDGs has been carried out. Since many policies are already implemented in Greece through the EU acquis, the mapping focused on identifying missing policy instruments, areas of insufficient action and areas for cross-sectoral co-operation to ensure policy coherence and spread good practice, both domestically and through the country's bilateral and international partnerships. To enhance transparency, partnerships and accountability, actions and activities have been carried out with a wide array of non-state actors. These have all been recorded and included in the VNR Report, highlighting the role of key stakeholders in the implementation of the SDGs.

The results of the mapping exercise, detailed in the 2018 VNR Report, underline that the unprecedented economic crisis that Greece faced in recent years forced a shift of focus in political priorities, with the predominant economic policies often creating divergence rather than contributing to the accomplishment of the totality of the SDGs.

Therefore, it has been essential for Greece to focus on the *social pillar* of sustainable development, with measures to address the short-term difficulties of the different affected groups.

Priorities included the fight against unemployment, particularly for youth and women, the reduction of social inequalities, progress in gender equality and the promotion of social inclusion for immigrants and other vulnerable population groups. The above have been implemented through a robust social solidarity system, establishment of a minimum guaranteed income for all, universal access to quality health care services, fight against energy poverty for vulnerable citizen groups through a reduced social residential electricity tariff, support for “energy communities” and free access to quality education to everyone at all education levels. Social pillar policies have been implemented with a particular outlook to regional cohesion, placing emphasis on the less advantaged geographic regions of the country, such as remote islands and mountainous areas.

Regarding the *economic pillar* of sustainable development, Greece attached, over the last years, particular importance to policies and measures for competitive, innovative and sustainable economic growth. Good examples encompass measures for improving the business environment, promoting social and solidarity economy and encouraging domestic and foreign direct investment, for highlighting the role of human capital as a key driver for economic growth, for supporting research, technological development and innovation, for sustainability in agricultural and rural development, for efficient and effective tourism products and services, and for developing reliable and sustainable infrastructure and transport systems.

With regard to the *environmental pillar* of sustainable development, important progress has been made in recent years, in all related SDGs. Key national priorities are the shift towards circular economy and sustainable consumption and production patterns, as a means for creating new jobs, reducing, reusing and recycling waste and increasing resource efficiency. A National Action Plan on Circular Economy was endorsed by Greece in April 2018. With regard to the transition towards a low carbon and climate resilient economy, Greece remains firmly committed to the Paris Agreement objectives, and is already in a good place to meet its national GHG emissions reduction targets earlier than 2030. Successes also include the full application of Integrated Water Resources Management principles, considering both social aspects and ecosystem needs, and the significant increase in the penetration of renewable energy sources. The completion of flagship projects, such as the interconnection of many non-connected islands to the electricity grid of the mainland by 2030, will facilitate the achievement of climate change mitigation goals and support the reduction of air emissions. Finally, important progress is achieved towards the full digitalization of land-uses across the Greek territory (in land and sea), through the National Cadastre and the development of forest maps, which by 2020 will ensure the full protection status of the ecological wealth of the country, facilitate investments and control urbanisation. In parallel, sustainable urban mobility is promoted as a priority, in Greek cities, to improve quality of life, increase energy efficiency and decrease GHGs.

Concerning the institutional dimension of sustainable development, Greece, in order to build effective, accountable and transparent institutions and enhance open, participatory and democratic processes, promotes specific structural and institutional reforms, especially in the public administration, with the view to achieve broader systemic transformations. The reforms aim at boosting employment and enhanced transparency, competitiveness, innovation, and more efficient service provision to citizens. Measures include the expansion of e-governance tools, the fight against corruption, the protection of human rights and the enhancement of strong partnerships within borders, between all stakeholders, as well as beyond borders, by promoting international cooperation bilaterally, regionally and globally.

The 2018 VNR Report presents some immediate next steps that will capitalise on the experience of the VNR: (i) A National Implementation Plan for the SDGs will be elaborated, engaging all stakeholders at all stages, from the design and implementation of actions to monitoring, evaluation and review. The Plan, apart from enhancing consistency with the national growth strategy and mobilizing resources for implementation, will also focus on identifying key cross-cutting priorities to be pursued through new cross-sectoral and vertical integration tools and arrangements that will produce a special value added for the implementation of the SDGs in Greece. (ii) The Hellenic Parliament will play an instrumental role in this overall follow-up process through joint parliamentary committees meetings to review progress, provide guidance to fine-tune line actions and ensure the mainstreaming of the SDGs in all legislative and policy frameworks. (iii) Emphasis will be given on the quantitative and qualitative monitoring of progress. Using data and statistics is of outmost importance for the successful implementation of the SDGs, and so is the role of the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) in providing high quality official statistics, within the framework of the global and European SDG indicator sets.

Following the regime change after the July 2019 election, and the provisions of law 4622/2019, a redesign of the center of government and the functioning of the ministries is taking place. The details of the changes remain to be settled by a presidential decree, which has not been issued yet (as of December 2019). In the meantime, this affects the progress of the SDGs implementation in Greece, as it is described in the “Next Steps” chapter of the 2018 VNR Review. Pending issues include the appointment of the competent center-of-government body that will now take up the leading/coordinating role, the degree of correlation between the SDGs and the new growth strategy, and possible revisions and adjustments of the national priorities.