

Thank you Mr Chairman,
Dear Ministers, Commissioner,
Colleagues,

First of all I would like to thank our host, Minister Srdjan Darmanović, not only for organising this meeting on this timely topic, but especially for the way the Montenegrin Presidency has tackled the COVID-19 pandemic challenge, since its very beginning. The Extraordinary Summit of the CEI Prime Ministers on solidarity and cooperation, promptly organised by Montenegro last May, indicates a coordinated regional approach, which is and remains the best way to face a crisis of this kind.

Dear Ministers, Colleagues, I am pleased to witness that your presence here today reconfirms your commitment to this approach, which is the core mission of the CEI. Regional cooperation is more important now than ever because - I am sure you agree - no one can think of winning this crisis alone and no one must be left behind. Regional cooperation, in this regard, offers a broad platform for joint action and partnerships.

In the immediate response to the crisis, we have seen regional solidarity in action. Multilateral cooperation proves once again to be indispensable as we strive to address the consequences of the pandemic. Together we have accomplished achievements we can be proud of.

From our side, the Secretariat has done its utmost: 2 are the main initiatives on which we have focused our efforts.

Firstly, in cooperation with the WHO, we have established a Task Force, endorsed by our Prime Ministers. It is a successful tool providing a coherent response to the health emergency, and I wish to thank Regional Director for Europe of the WHO Hans Kluge who actively engaged with us in these efforts.

In almost five months since the start of its operations, the Task Force has been able to create a solidarity network among our Member States, fostering exchange of information and experience, strategies and best practices on various aspects of the pandemic.

This is a first of its kind initiative, and we are proud of it, if we also consider that Ursula von der Leyen, President of the EU Commission, in her latest speech, stressed the importance of the creation of networks, among the European countries, in facing the pandemic challenges.

We consider this cooperation with the WHO a very fruitful one, and we are strongly committed to strengthening it and making it grow.

Based on this positive experience, we should move forward by further enhancing our regional cooperation through strong partnerships. In this regard, we welcome similar initiatives, especially in the economic field, which could support us in facing the consequences of the pandemic also in this sector.

The second important initiative we have launched is the Extraordinary Call for Proposals, dedicated to health, education and SMEs. On the one hand, it could be considered a success for the huge number of applicants, more than 7000, but on the other hand it shows how grave the situation on the ground actually is.

We acted promptly to respond to the most urgent needs with all our resources, and I am thankful to the countries for the common decision to use the entire budget of our Cooperation Fund. A double thanks to Italy for doubling its contribution offering an amount of the CEI fund at the EBRD for this Call. Nevertheless, it was not enough to satisfy all the requests.

In this regard, the Secretariat has launched a fund raising campaign trying to involve the most relevant Institutions starting from the European Commission. I would like to thank Commissioner Vharely, who expressed his willingness on several occasions to support us. Your presence dear Commissioner at all the latest important meetings of our Organization shows your strong commitment. The EBRD is another long-standing partner, and we are grateful for everything it has done and it could still do for our Countries. For this reason let me thank Mattia Romani, an old friend of ours, who is here with us today on behalf of the Bank.

We are confident to be able to count on this crucial support, but the gravity of the situation on the ground calls for a stronger commitment from the Governments of

all our Member States as well. I am sure, dear Ministers, you will do the best you can to strengthen the CEI, enabling it to better respond to the needs of our citizens.

To overcome any possible dramatic consequences, we should adjust our future actions by enhancing trust and confidence and creating opportunities and skills in health as well as socio-economic related sectors.

We must remember: these challenges do not stop at borders. We must be prepared to further tackle them in a coordinated manner. Only cooperation among all will enable us to counter the negative effects and prevent any catastrophes.

Let me conclude, we must draw lessons from the crisis and transform it into opportunities to build the region we want – stable, prosperous, just and inclusive.

I can assure you the Secretariat will do whatever it needs to achieve these goals.

I am sure this meeting will provide us with the support and impetus we need to improve our work. Thank you for your attention