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|  | **EUROPEAN UNION****Permanent Delegation to the United Nations Office****and other international organisations in Geneva**  **UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL** |

**Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law Third session 16–17 November 2021**

**Agenda point 2: Equal access to justice: a foundation for human rights, democracy, the rule of law and sustainable development.**

Madam President,

Respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law are the founding values of the European Union and will continue to underpin all aspects of its internal and external policies.

Guided by the universal values and principles embedded in the UN Charter and international law, the EU is a staunch defender of human rights, democracy and the rule of law throughout the world as demonstrated by the new EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, and in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Supporting the rule of law and the fair administration of justice are key priorities of this Action Plan. The actions include support to the strengthening of independent and impartial judiciaries, promoting the right to a fair trial, rights-based and gender-responsive justice as well as equal access for all to justice and legal assistance, including by legal aid and digital innovation. Emphasis is also given to the development of child-friendly justice systems and the improvement of the treatment of all persons deprived of liberty.

Guaranteeing effective justice systems, equal access to justice and legal assistance is essential not only to protect and empower all individuals, but also to build resilient, inclusive and democratic societies and to contribute to a business friendly environment.

In the current COVID-19 pandemic context, human rights, democracy and the rule of law should remain at the heart of any response to and recovery from the crisis, including as regards access to justice.

The European Union remains committed to promoting a global system of human rights and democracy and will continue to engage at bilateral, regional and multilateral level on rule of law issues, including in addressing barriers that hinder equal access to justice for all.

Thank you.