Mr. Chair,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union.

The Candidate Countries Turkey, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, Montenegro*, and Serbia*, the countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia, align themselves with this statement.

Human rights are and will remain the silver thread of EU policy, and the EU takes this opportunity to reaffirm this commitment to those universal rights, to be respected by all and without exceptions. The EU is unwavering in its support for the ratification and implementation of international human rights treaties, and will be an ever vigilant guardian of that process.

This year, we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the World Conference on Human Rights and the adoption of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action. At that Conference, the universality of human rights was prominently and forcefully reaffirmed, as was their indivisibility, interdependence and interrelatedness. The Conference also highlighted the important inter-relationship between the realisation of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. In addition, women's rights as universal human rights became a mainstreamed concept, and it was reaffirmed that States are responsible for the promotion and protection of human rights. The Conference also laid the groundwork for a new and comprehensive institutional set-up at the international level, and prepared the way for the creation of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

* The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.
I would like to take this opportunity therefore, on behalf of the EU, to congratulate the High Commissioner for Human Rights, her predecessors and staff for their relentless efforts during the past 20 years, which have greatly contributed to advancing the realisation of all human rights for all. Additionally, the OHCHR has expanded its field presence and technical assistance capacity to a point where they now have more staff on the ground world than in Geneva. In order to continue the work as successfully, we will continue to champion the Commissioner's independence, and we also note that it is also incumbent upon all of us to continue to maintain the resources of this important institution.

In this context, we must remember that, whilst standard setting is a laudable goal, it is not an end in and of itself. Only through a vigorous on implementation of the existing standards will we realise our common objective: the full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all. Technical assistance can foster effective implementation and we commend all the technical support provided by the High Commissioner's Office – it is essential, as is bilateral assistance and expertise.

The EU supports the High Commissioner in her efforts to strengthen the UN human rights treaty bodies. Over the two previous sessions of the General Assembly, the EU, together with all delegations, has engaged in the General Assembly discussions on strengthening the human rights treaty body system, led by the co-facilitators from Iceland and Indonesia. We have actively participated in the discussion so as to improve the situation of rights holders on the ground and address the challenges facing the treaty bodies. Given the urgency of these challenges, we are committed to reaching a concrete outcome to this process by February 2014, the final deadline set by the General Assembly, and would like to see the General Assembly consider the proposals before us without further delay.

We also believe that GA process should not serve as a means to block steps taken by the treaty bodies to strengthen and enhance their effective functioning. In going forward, we recall that the treaty body strengthening process must respect the competences and autonomy of the various actors and emphasise the continuing importance of the contributions and participation of all stakeholders, including treaty body experts and civil society.

Mr. Chair,

The UN Charter, reaffirmed at the Vienna Conference, firmly placed human rights at the centre of UN activities and we are glad that today human rights are considered to be one of the three main pillars of the work of the United Nations, both internationally and at the country level. The EU supports all efforts to use the existing human rights expertise of the UN Human Rights Council and its special procedures, to strengthen the operative UN capacities throughout all programmes and units.

Mr. Chair,
With representatives from over 1500 NGOs present at the Vienna Conference, civil society, for the first time, gained recognition as indispensable partners in the quest for human rights. Sadly, today, in many countries, civil society actors face intimidation, harassment, and even violent attacks. The EU strongly rejects the limiting of civil society space, and the attempts to hinder the work of human rights defenders. We must all work together to create a safe environment for human rights defenders to enable their work, including in multilateral fora. The Human Rights Council must remain a safe space for civil society to air their concerns and raise issues – the EU will vigorously oppose all efforts to limit the debate. The EU will also continue to speak out should human rights defenders be prevented from participating in the debate or suffer reprisals for cooperation or seeking to cooperate with the UN human rights system.

Mr. Chair,

The affirmation of the universality of all human rights was a major achievement of the Vienna Conference. That simple truth – that every man, woman and child everywhere enjoys the same rights and fundamental freedoms – has tragically come under attack. The EU reiterates its strong commitment to the equal protection of the rights and freedoms for all human persons, irrespective of their religion, belief, culture, ethnicity, disability, gender, skin colour, sexual orientation or gender identity. We will continue to make every effort to promote the universality of all human rights for everyone worldwide.

The Vienna Declaration states that all human rights are universal and indivisible. They must all be addressed, and with the same emphasis. The EU therefore welcomes the entry into of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and now is the time to ensure that when an individual's economic, social, and cultural rights are violated, they have access to remedy.

Mr. Chair,

The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action remains a key reference document for the advancement of human rights worldwide and has created an important part of the system within which we now operate. As we mark its 20th anniversary, the EU wishes to highlight the importance of mainstreaming human rights. Human rights are not something separate, divisible or discrete – rather, they embody both our highest ideals and most basic expectations for life in this world. The EU will always place human rights at the centre of its work, in all areas.

Although much has been achieved since the Vienna Conference, we can never afford to be complacent. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action's strong commitment to the universality remains our inspiration and the platform from which to address today's challenges, thereby contributing to the full realisation of all human rights for all.