Mr. President, Ambassador Ambrazevich,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

I am pleased to be with you today for the first Plenary dedicated to the report of the Conference on Disarmament to the General Assembly – a time to look back at the 2020 Session and reflect on the outlook for 2021.

The Covid-19 pandemic has taken a heavy toll in all aspects of our lives. International diplomacy and intergovernmental bodies are no exception.
It would be reasonable to think that our work was upended when the pandemic put a halt on meetings at the Palais des Nations for a few months, and it would be understandable to cast the work of the Conference this year in that light.

It is also a fact that, this year again, the Conference was unable to adopt a programme of work or implement its core negotiating mandate.

However, I would be remiss if I did not recall the efforts undertaken by the members and Presidencies of the Conference throughout 2020.
Efforts that should be drawn on to contribute to an environment in which the purpose of this body can start to be realized again, as we envision 2021.

From the outset, we saw strong cooperation among the six Presidents, and between the last from 2018 and first from 2021. I believe this was a positive development. This informal mechanism has allowed for continuity with 2018, which had seen interesting proposals emerge on ways to conceive a programme of work.
It not only allows for continuity between sessions but also between presidencies, strengthening the stewardship of the Conference beyond what a single President can achieve, rendering obsolete the invisible four-week timeline that a single President may feel bound to, and amplifying the collective ownership of what the Conference may achieve beyond individual presidencies and possibly across regional groups.

I am, therefore, pleased to learn that the 2021 Presidencies intend to continue on this path and have already started coordinating.
This year also saw constructive discussions on a package containing a draft proposal for a programme of work, put forward by the six Presidents under the Presidencies of Algeria and then Argentina, which held promise. Setting aside the fact that it did not ultimately elicit the agreement of all, I believe it was a creative effort to find a way to resume work in a manner that reflected a broad spectrum of priorities and interests.

I further wish to recall the ‘framing questions’ initiative, under the Presidency of Australia, the results of which are incarnadated in an official document of the Conference.
This type of exercise allowed to take a snapshot of the priorities of the different Conference members and of the views on ways to break the current deadlock and be more effective. It also allowed diverse opinions to be expressed in order to build consensus for negotiations, including regarding the possibility for the Conference to consider softer instruments.

Another important initiative this year, was the Australian non-paper suggesting a technical amendment to make the Rules of Procedure gender-neutral.
As a Gender Champion, I fully support this effort. Addressing gender insensitive rules of procedure should be as automatic as the correction of a spelling mistake. This, seemingly purely editorial issue carries profound meaning for equality among genders and respect for diversity. It is my hope that this proposal be further pursued in 2021.
Finally, allow me to mention the event co-convened with the Austrian Presidency, during which the Members of the Conference on Disarmament and civil society representatives discussed the nexus among disarmament, sustainable development, human rights and humanitarian objectives, as well as global security in the Covid-19 and post Covid-19 contexts. These types of exchanges can provide a useful contribution to the work in the Conference. I strongly encourage the 2021 Presidents to take further ownership of such initiatives, which I will continue to support.
Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

The members of this Conference have demonstrated a determination to continue working together. Virtual meetings of the six Presidencies, with regional coordinators, and regional groups continued throughout the lockdown, and pursuance of some of the initiatives I mentioned was quickly adapted to the novel situation.
Against all odds and in spite of resource constraints, the Conference remains to date one of the few disarmament bodies that has resumed formal meetings, starting with the Austrian Presidency, followed by the Presidency of Bangladesh, and now under the Presidency of Belarus.

While the 2020 Session of the Conference on Disarmament is not over yet, I think it already provides ample food for thought for 2021.

Expecting an immediate start of negotiations on any of the core agenda items is unrealistic.
So, while proposals for a schedule of work for the Conference continue to be discussed, engagement with civil society and other initiatives can help move away from heated exchanges towards greater cooperation, information sharing and trust building – all necessary to lay the groundwork for negotiations to take place.

Throughout the year, I have heard references to agreements on codes of conduct or other confidence building measures.
Reference was made to initiatives to ensure peace and security in outer space, as well as the prevention of an arms race in outer space as a long-term outstanding core agenda item of this Conference. Positions were voiced on an FMCT or FMT alongside those on negative security assurances and nuclear disarmament.

Each of these agenda items encapsulates subtopics that could be explored further and progressively.
Some of you suggested discussions on nuclear risk reduction, nuclear disarmament verification, new types of weapons of mass destruction and new systems of such weapons, or more broadly the cross-cutting impact of emerging technologies on each of the agenda items and on international arms control and non-proliferation.

While you discuss and ultimately decide on the issues that you wish to address in this forum in 2021, I encourage you to explore any avenue that may increase confidence and prepare the ground for progressive substantive work.
Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

The United Nations Secretary-General, the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs and myself have drawn your attention to the dangerous trends we see today – from a renewed reliance on nuclear weapons for security and stability, to a marked shift in the global security landscape, to new means of warfare that largely lack regulatory frameworks, as well as to the erosion of the disarmament regime.
Upcoming review conferences of important disarmament instruments, such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, the Biological Weapons Convention, and the Convention on Conventional Weapons, will provide an opportunity to home in on specific issues and strengthen existing regimes.

The Conference on Disarmament also needs to do its part.
Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

We do not know how the Covid-19 situation will evolve. While we all aspire to a return to normalcy, we should take advantage of the fact that participation in the Conference on Disarmament does not generally require international travel. It is therefore less susceptible to unforeseen circumstances we see in other fora.
Looking forward to 2021, we hope that in-person meetings will remain possible, while maintaining the possibility of meeting in hybrid formats. Member States should however be mindful that the financial limitations we face today, and on which your Permanent Missions will hear more during the briefing this afternoon, are likely to persist.
I invite you to consider these realities as you plan for your work in 2021. Any early, if tentative, outline of what are likely to be your activities can help preparedness on our side, so that we can do the necessary to accommodate your requirements to the extent possible.

I wish you all the best for productive deliberations on the report to the General Assembly and fruitful discussions during the thematic plenary planned for 8 September.

Thank you.