Distinguished guests,

It is a great honour to be addressing the opening ceremony of the Regional Forum for Europe, organized in the context of the ITU Global Innovation Week 2020. During an immersive five-day programme, a series of interactive panels and insightful discussions, policy-makers, industry, academia, entrepreneurs and other key stakeholders of a competitive ICT-centric innovation ecosystem, are experiencing a learning journey focused on understanding, modifying or developing new practices that fuel digital transformation in their communities in the age of Covid19. Today’s agenda adds a regional dimension to the effort of magnifying the impact of digital innovation, providing valuable insight on how to create an enabling environment and a sustainable innovation ecosystem that accelerates the digital transition at European level.

There is a new world being shaped in the aftermath of Covid19 and valuable lessons to be learnt from this experience. Trends already underway in the global setting, such as the shift towards knowledge-based economies, socio-demographic changes, and political and economic uncertainty, have been amplified by the impact of the pandemic. Technology has been part of every single measure during the crisis, allowing governments to maintain an orderly functioning of public services and monitor, anticipate and influence the spread of the virus. The world adapted quickly to news ways of working, learning, interacting and engaging with our citizens, our workforce and our communities. Access to digital infrastructure and connectivity have never been more important. It has become evident that virtually every facet of modern life – in business, culture or entertainment, at work and at home – depends on information and communication technologies. In this respect, I would like to extend a warm thanks to the ITU, not just for the initiative of designing this forum aimed at empowering participants with the methodology, frameworks, tools and context-relevant case studies to accelerate digital transformation in their communities through innovation and entrepreneurship, but most importantly, for its overall contribution in fostering cooperation among the States of the world to promote the development of telecommunication networks and access to telecommunication services. As global developments and technological evolutions continue to take place, accelerate and evolve, international collaboration and solidarity is an investment in our shared future.

Dear guests,

In a fragile world, defined by both transformational challenges and opportunities, the competitiveness of any economy is deeply rooted into its readiness and ability to compete and excel in this new norm. Leveraging digital technologies and optimizing our nations’ and organizations’ innovation capacity is vital for achieving a recovery that leads to greener, more inclusive, sustainable economies, and stronger, more resilient societies. A strong innovation ecosystem depends largely on the quality of its actors, the quality of its institutions, as well as the quality of links with other communities. It is our job, therefore, to introduce those exact national policies and strategies that will lead to bridging the growing digital innovation gap amongst countries, and create digitally mature societies which does not just innovate more, but differently.

Only about 1 out of 5 companies across the EU are highly digitalised. Similarly, around 60% of large industries and more than 90% of SMEs lag behind in digital innovation. The digital revolution brings exciting opportunities, but many companies still find it difficult to know in which technologies to invest and how to secure financing for their digital transformation. There is a variety of organizational forms that can support digital innovation and cross-border cooperation and help ensure that every company, small or large, high-tech or not, can take advantage of digital opportunities, such as technology parks, business incubators and technology transfer offices, accelerators, competence centers and, more recently, digital innovation hubs.

For Europe to remain competitive internationally, all economic sectors must be able to reap the benefits of digital transformation. Digital Europe, the first-ever funding initiative investing €9.2 billion to align with increasing digital challenges, included in the next long-term EU budget 2021-2027, dedicates €1.2 bn to ensure the wide use of digital technologies across the economy and society. Its purpose is to provide support to high impact deployments in areas of public interest, such as health and smart communities, to European public administrations and industry to deploy and access state of-the-art digital technologies (such as blockchain), while enabling the creation and strengthening of a network of European Digital Innovation Hubs, which can help companies improve their processes, products and services through the use of digital technologies.

As an EU member, Cyprus is designing its own ICT-centric innovation policies, strategies and programmes aimed infusing a culture entrepreneurship and innovation across the whole spectrum of society and enterprises. Speeding up digital transformation and optimizing excellence in eGovernment, advancing digital skills, while launching tailored-made incentives and financial instruments for cross-sectoral investment into research and innovation, we aim to develop a future-proof, digitally fit, knowledge-based economy and further strengthen Cyprus’ position as a dynamic business hub in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Facilitating high speed connectivity and broadband penetration, and the deployment of 5G networks is key in our efforts in today’s interconnected world. Leading by example, we aim to create an environment that supports, encourages and incentivises others, enterprises and society, to innovate and adopt new technologies, enhance their innovation management capacity be able to adapt to changes wrought by digital disruption.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Promoting synergies, interconnecting and strengthening our innovation ecosystems through the exchange of best practices, resources and skills will practically benefit all parties, for it will support economic recovery and pave the way for sustainable development. International initiatives, such as this Forum and cooperation in the context of international organizations, such as the ITU, can be truly valuable in crafting a coordinated, targeted and efficient response to the numerous challenges lying ahead, both in terms of reinforcing our society’s resilience against Covid-19 as well as facilitating a sustainable digital and green future.

I wish to thank you all for joining us and wish you productive and insightful experience.

Thank you.