Dear Colleagues,

We welcome the Ministerial Segment of the 62nd Session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs and the opportunity to take a closer look at this multifactorial issue and the policies to address it. Encouraging a systematic scientific and political dialogue on drug strategy at international level may greatly contribute to an effective response to a problem that affects all countries worldwide, in different ways and to different degrees, and which is related to economic and social inequalities.

In Greece, while monitoring developments and delivering on the commitments arising from European and international cooperation, we take a holistic approach to dependence, including not only drugs, but also alcohol and emerging dependences (Internet, gambling, etc.). Being sensitive towards the needs and dignity of the population’s most vulnerable and weakest groups, we strengthen public policies on addictions, through a wide range of services provided by dedicated Public Bodies, with respect for human rights and the Rule of Law.

In particular, by setting as political priority in the addiction field the universal coverage of the entire population, the access to services considering the special needs of addicts and the protection of Public Health, the range of addiction interventions is provided for free by the Public Health System. This range mostly comprises prevention programmes, harm reduction services (such as streetwork and drug consumption rooms), opioid substitution programmes, detoxification and rehabilitation programmes, psychosocial support and social reintegration interventions. By investing in this person-centred, evidence-based approach which is of added value to the protection of addicts’ psychosomatic health, as well as the entire society’s health and well-being, we have secured funding for all programmes under the State budget and through European Structural Funds, despite fiscal restraints and austerity measures. This has resulted in the therapeutic coverage and care of 70% of current opioid users, which is one of the highest rates in Europe. The networking of public structures, the contribution of the civil society, the complementarity of actions, and stronger synergies in provided services are a critical condition for implementing the strategy of universal coverage, eliminating the social stigma and marginalisation of drug users; “no one will be left behind”, as mandated by the WHO.

Furthermore, with a view to upgrading and redefining addiction services, and in order to address new challenges (synthetic drugs, new psychoactive substances), the Greek Health Ministry is currently placing particular emphasis on improving access to “controlled” substances for medical reasons and their electronic prescription, the establishment of registers of patients and other care recipients from Public bodies, the conduct of epidemiological studies, and the establishment and operation of a dedicated body assessing addiction treatment structures with the technical assistance provided by the World Health Organisation. This is the only way allowing for implementation of an evidence-based strategic plan in the field of Addictions and drugs in particular, ensuring the effective use of system resources and high-quality care.

An integrated addiction policy and curbing both the availability of and demand for narcotic substances in contemporary societies is a matter requiring strong political will for the care of particularly vulnerable and socially excluded people; it requires an effective Public Health System and a reliable Social Welfare State; it is an investment in eliminating inequalities and in social cohesion; it is a critical step towards achieving the UN SDGs and Health Equity, as advocated by the WHO.