Statement by Prof. Maria Leptin, President of the European Research Council
- ***Please check against delivery-***

Good morning.

I would like to congratulate the United Nations on the tenth anniversary of this Science and Technology Forum.

It is an honour for me to speak here as President of the European Research Council (ERC) and as representative of the European Union together with my colleagues from the Joint Research Centre, part of the European Commission.

The Forum provides a wonderful platform to discuss the contribution of science to attaining the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. You will not be surprised when I say that I have tremendous faith in the power of science as a potential force for good. I have no doubt that science can improve people's lives and help to achieve important objectives, and I applaud the UN for pursuing a policy based on scientific evidence.

The ERC is an agency of the EU that funds frontier research in all areas of science and scholarship, including the social sciences and humanities. ERC-funded research projects are selected with scientific excellence as the sole selection criterion. Since its inception in 2007, the ERC has funded over 14000 researchers, 14 of whom went on to receive the Nobel Prize.

The aim is to give ERC grantees the freedom to carry out ambitious projects of their own choosing. The philosophy of the ERC rests on the idea that researchers know best the most promising research areas to explore. We trust the best to push the frontiers of our knowledge.

But how does this approach help us to solve global challenges and key objectives such as the SDGs? Science is, at its core, an attempt to understand the world around us. And I for one believe that this is a worthwhile end in itself. But what gives science its transformative impact is that by understanding the world we can change the world.

Without understanding there are no real solutions to problems. And sometimes solutions come from a totally unexpected path. Advances in one area, sometimes very theoretical ones, open up opportunities in other areas, sometimes unexpected ones. Serendipity is often at play. That is why focusing all our efforts only on known problems or known solutions can be counterproductive. We need to support research across a broad front. In this way, frontier research can help us prepare for unpredictable future crises.

The ERC has recently released a report on how frontier research leads to transformative change. The report covers over 300 projects, funded in sum with €653 million, that address the critical global challenges of biodiversity loss, climate change, pollution, and widening social disparities resulting from them.

The report illustrates how fundamental research addresses the key challenges we face in finding solutions for lower emissions and to achieve the climate goals – whether they explore new methods for protecting ecosystems, or study supply chains and options for accelerating sustainability efforts while promoting decent global living standards. And there are many other examples.

So you see that the ERC supports research that contributes to societal change and helps drive transformative solutions for a sustainable and equitable future.

It is crucial that researchers are given the freedom and independence to follow their curiosity and pursue their research, without any political influence. Researchers need the right working conditions: a supportive environment and infrastructure, solid financial support and reasonable career perspectives.

I consider academic freedom as a core democratic principle. While the EU is not immune to challenges, I believe we are currently a global leader in academic freedom.

The EU is fully committed to freedom of scientific research. As President von der Leyen said in Paris earlier this week: *science remains the fuel of progress and growth for our societies. Without the ideas and breakthroughs that come from scientific research, progress sooner or later stagnates.*