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Session I: Preventing and Combatting Corruption through Digital Technologies

Intervention by the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Ambassador Peter Burian

At the outset, I would like to commend the Albanian Chairmanship in Office for its initiative and leadership and welcome the focus of the 28th OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum on prevention and combatting corruption through innovation.

It is an honour for me to represent the European Union in this important discussion. As you know, these topics are part of the key priorities of the EU – including the Green Deal and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, which confirm the importance of digitalisation and the EU digital model.

Corruption is like a cancer in societies, hitting all aspect of development. Addressing corruption in all its forms, with the participation of all society and using innovative approaches is very important for achieving the strategic objectives of sustainable development in all OSCE participating states – increasing their resilience, prosperity and stability.

Let me focus in my remarks on Central Asia – which is the region I am engaged with as the EU Special Representative.

When adopting the new EU Strategy on Central Asia, the Council of the EU reaffirmed the readiness of the EU to enhance cooperation in all areas with particular emphasis on rule of law, the promotion of accountability and supporting Central Asian countries in their fight against corruption.

In spite of many positive achievements in building their economic and social models, many challenges remain to be addressed by our Central Asian partners to this end.

For example, the business climate is characterized by complex legislation and heavy administrative procedures, to varying degrees, creating fertile ground for corruption. The strong role of heavily subsidized state-owned companies distorts incentives and leads to an uneven playing field. This fuels the development of the informal economy.

I am pleased to note that our partners themselves identified those shortcomings and want to address them in their national development strategies. Here, I would like to refer to the ambitious

reform processes in Uzbekistan and the recent (September 2) address to the nation of President of Kazakhstan Tokayev, highlighting the importance of involving civil society/citizens in the discussion on the most important tasks, including systemic fight against corruption. Kyrgyzstan's recent initiative to join the Open Government Partnership is another concrete example of those national efforts for strengthening transparency of public administration.

However, challenges continue to exist for translating these strategies into concrete practical steps. Much remains to be done to align legal frameworks with applicable international standards such as the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC).

The EU wants to continue to be a strong and reliable partner in those transformation and reform processes.

For achieving that, we have developed a set of programs and mechanisms for sharing experiences, technologies and good practices by our member states and institutions. For example, in November 2019 we have launched three EU-funded ambitious multi-year programs amounting to EUR 28 Million that aim to support trade, rule of law as well as investments and growth in Central Asia.

In all those programs, steps and measures for improving the business environment are clearly reflecting and underpinning the national efforts to fight corruption as one of the key elements of making investment environment more attractive for investors and more conducive to further development of the private sector.

As in other regions of the world, the global health crisis has given a new impetus to digitalisation in Central Asia. With social distancing and the closure of physical locations, governments have recognised the importance of robust digital infrastructures and policies that can support digital service delivery. Prior to the crisis, many governments across Central Asia have carried out substantial work to digitise a range of public services, with this work accelerating in the current context, as seen with the popularity of Kyrgyzstan's e-government services platform, Tunduk. To support this process, the European Commission is launching a new programme in Kyrgyzstan, through which we will support the Government's digital transition efforts. This will include supporting the digitisation of public services and the digital education of the Kyrgyz population.

Digitalisation can help SMEs seize new business opportunities, develop and promote new products, and access information to improve their performance.

Digitalisation of public services can also increase their quality and access, as well as reducing corruption risks. On the other hand, the lack of digitalisation and access to affordable internet can create a risk for deepening inequalities in societies, in particular for marginal groups and in rural areas.

In this context, I would also like to mention a new initiative that the EU is currently devising together with the Kyrgyz Republic with great support from all CA countries, the EU-CA Economic Forum which is supposed to take place next year in Bishkek.

The Forum should give special attention to promoting an innovative and sustainable approach to economic and business development. It was agreed that a special focus in the Forum will be given to taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the digital transition. This is following the ambitious new Digital Agenda of the EU, which sets digital and data technologies as one of the cornerstones of the EU's international partnerships, as well as is in line with national development priorities of Central Asian countries, putting digitalisation high on national development agenda.

To conclude let me reiterate here that the EU does not consider digitalization a panacea for all the aspects of fighting corruption. For fighting corruption a comprehensive approach on all levels and sectors is a key element of success.

The independence and integrity of the judiciary are crucial for anti-corruption efforts and proper good governance. The role of an independent media, involvement of civil society and respect for human rights should not be omitted either.

Mentioning those challenges, among many others, I just wanted to highlight the importance of the discussion, such as we have today for identifying those challenges and defining the best ways and practices addressing them.

EU is ready to share those practices with partners through different programs, including twinning and TAIEX and other mechanisms. I am pleased to note that the aforementioned digitalisation support programme in Kyrgyzstan includes a twinning component, where the vast experience of EU Member States will be shared. We hope to multiply these exchanges also with other partners. Our digital cooperation will be value driven and our engagement with partner countries will abide by basic principles of fair use, consumer rights and data protection as well as equal access to affordable internet and digital technologies.

Finally, I wanted to highlight the importance of working together with different organizations in synergy, supporting national and regional efforts in the area of fighting corruption, based on internationally recognized standards, including the respect for human rights. The EU clearly sees the importance and benefits of this kind of interaction and closer cooperation with OSCE, OECD, UNODC and others in pursuing similar objectives.

Thank you for your attention.