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**Key note Statement**

**23rd OSCE Economic & Environmental Forum,**

**“Water governance in the OSCE area –  
increasing security and stability through co-operation”**

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Excellencies, dear colleagues, distinguished delegates,

- It is my honour and pleasure to address this important meeting on water governance organized by the OSCE.
- First of all, I would like to extend the greetings and apologies of the Executive Secretary of the UNECE, Mr Christian Friis Bach who regrettably was not able to attend this event due to another urgent and unexpected commitment. I am delivering this speech on his behalf.
- In just two weeks, world leaders are expected to adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This crucial framework is based on 5 pillars: People, planet, peace, partnerships and prosperity. 17 goals and 169 targets will become our lighthouse for the next 15 years, guiding our work in support of member states and all citizens. These goals promise to pave the way for the eradication of poverty and hunger and for promoting peace and prosperity in a healthy environment for future generations.
- Reaching the SDGs will require an unprecedented mobilization of efforts, resources, but also new and more effective partnerships between countries, sectors and organizations. Taken together, UNECE and OSCE address most of these goals. Cooperation between our two organizations will be even more crucial, building on our long established and successful partnership in a number of fields, including environmental issues, sustainable development and water governance.
- Water is key for sustainable development which is finally now recognized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: the cross-sectoral nature of water is not only reflected in its inclusion in several different goals, ranging from cities to health and disasters. It is a breakthrough that, for the first time, water does not only have a dedicated goal (number 6) among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but is also recognized in its universality since the goal is not only focused on water

supply and sanitation, but also covers water quality, water resources management and biodiversity.

- Goal 6 and in particular its target 6.5 also recognize that water governance is crucial for achieving all water-related targets, from access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation; water quality; water efficiency and sustainability of water use; protection of water-related ecosystems; water-related disasters; health impacts from water-borne disease and water pollution; to capacity building and stakeholders involvement. In this regard, I very much welcome the topic of this year's economic and environmental forum, namely water governance. My colleague will later today present the UNECE review of water governance in the OSCE region.
- The new 2030 Agenda also contains a call for transboundary water cooperation. 60% of the world's freshwater courses are crossing borders and more than 50% of the population in the European and Asian parts of ECE the region lives within shared river basins. These resources need to be managed in cooperation. Any response to existing or emerging water challenges including equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water, water efficiency and sustainability of water use, prevention, control, and reduction of transboundary pollution and protection of water-related ecosystems, but also climate change adaptation requires cooperation between stakeholders across borders. It is a great step forward that this need is recognized in the SDG on water which states that, by 2030, integrated water resources management should be implemented at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation. In light of the growing environmental, social and economic challenges transboundary cooperation is essential for ensuring a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous future.
- In this regard, the UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) provides a crucial legal and intergovernmental framework for transboundary water cooperation. It aims to protect and ensure the quantity, quality and sustainable use of transboundary water resources by facilitating cooperation. By obliging its Parties to take all appropriate measures at the national level to prevent water pollution and use share waters in an equitable and reasonable way, the Water Convention also promotes good water governance both at the national level and transboundary level. The Water Convention itself is a testimony of the excellent cooperation between UNECE and OSCE as it was negotiated following a decision by an OSCE meeting in 1989. This excellent cooperation has continued throughout the years.

- Many people still believe that water is a source of conflict. However, in reality, water is much more frequently a source of cooperation. Let me take one example which once again demonstrates the complementarity of our organizations:
- As many of you know, the Sava agreement was the first intergovernmental agreement signed between the countries in South-Eastern Europe after the devastating war. How was this possible? Precisely, because of the same reasons that water now has a central place in the SDGs: because water is key to all aspects of life and sustainable development. UNECE and OSCE have both together supported the Sava countries in reaching the Sava agreement and setting up the Sava Commission.
- The OSCE and the UNECE Water Convention have been supporting governments in our region to respond to water challenges in the framework of the ENVSEC initiative by establishing legal and institutional frameworks for integrated water resources management structures, such as river basin commissions which are essential for sustainable water management. For example, in the Chu and Talas basin in Central Asia, UNECE and OSCE, together with other organizations have supported the establishment of the river basin commission which is to date the only bilateral commission in Central Asia.
- As the floods in the Sava basin last year have shown, also disasters do not know borders. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction therefore also includes provisions on transboundary cooperation in disaster risk reduction. OSCE and UNECE, together with other ENVSEC partners, demonstrate how this can happen concretely, by applying various tools and methodologies that support climate change adaptation and improve resilience to environmental risks in shared basins. For example, in the ENVSEC project implemented by UNECE and OSCE “Climate Change and Security in the Dniester River Basin” not only a transboundary vulnerability assessment has been developed, but also a transboundary adaptation strategy, which is now followed by implementation of some concrete measures on the ground. This project has also supported transboundary cooperation more generally by providing a much needed platform for cooperation and information exchange between the riparian countries in the absence of other such institutions. This example exactly shows how cooperation between UNECE and OSCE can happen, through the combination of two different but related mandates: the combination of legal and intergovernmental framework from the UNECE side and OSCE’s political and diplomatic focus and effective field operations on the other side.

- Disaster preparedness and risk reduction have also been supported by the network of 59 Aarhus Centres established by the OSCE in 14 countries. These centres have already demonstrated their catalytic role in promoting democracy, good governance and cooperation through the implementation of the principles of access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters, enshrined in the UNECE Aarhus Convention. By raising public awareness, disseminating information and engaging the public in decision-making they could therefore act as valuable partners in our efforts to help build resilient communities that can mitigate the risks associated with natural disasters and adapt to the long-term effects of climate change.
- Public participation, citizen involvement, access to information are indeed crucial preconditions for reaching the SDGs. With the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention), UNECE member states and OSCE participating countries have a very important instrument which can enable them to make this happen. The Aarhus centres help to translate the Aarhus Convention and its principles into concrete progress on the ground.
- Access to information, public participation and access to justice are also essential for achieving sustainable water governance. The public should have full access to information regarding for instance drinking water quality and availability as well as legal or institutional arrangements or water-related projects that could affect its well-being. Furthermore, decisions on water management whether of local, national or transboundary nature, inevitably concern and affect the people. It is therefore important to ensure that water-related decisions are taken through a transparent and participatory process and that decision-making bodies can be held accountable for their actions.
- The promotion of access to information, public engagement in decision-making and accountability, is a condition for reducing conflicts and establishing a trust-based relationship between citizens and public authorities. The Aarhus Centres have already demonstrated that they can function as a bridge between public authorities, non-governmental organisations and the public offering legal counselling, raising policy awareness and providing expert advice on the use of tools and on measures to mitigate the impact of human activities on the environment. In this context, their role in promoting good water governance is extremely relevant. Therefore, the OSCE

Secretariat and the OSCE field operations should continue to reinforce the capacities of Aarhus Centres related to good water governance at different levels, but also for networking of Aarhus Centres within and across borders in shared river basins.

- The range of opportunities for further cooperation between the UNECE and the OSCE in water governance, public participation and many other areas is significant. Our two organisations could further enhance our synergies to promote the benefits of transboundary water cooperation, to accelerate climate change adaptation and to promote cooperation on the ground. For example, the experience of the Dniester could be replicated in other basins interested to develop transboundary climate change adaptation strategies. OSCE and UNECE could continue to facilitate transboundary water cooperation in interested basins including through support for developing and implementing legal and institutional frameworks. The reporting mechanism under the Water Convention, expected to be introduced later this year, could be used by OSCE to guide its work on water governance at the national and basin level. OSCE could also apply the policy guidance note on identifying, assessing and communicating benefits of transboundary cooperation prepared under the Convention in interested countries and basins. Finally, additional synergies could be explored with regards to National Policy Dialogues and also the Protocol on Water and Health.
- The occasion to discuss such a strengthened cooperation will be the upcoming seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Water Convention, to be held on 17-19 November in Budapest where the new programme of work of the Water Convention will be discussed and adopted. Following the entry into force of the amendments opening the Convention for accession by non-ECE countries, this meeting will mark the Convention's transition into a global intergovernmental framework for transboundary cooperation. A number of important decisions will be taken, such as on the global opening and on partnerships. I would like to warmly invite all of you to this crucial meeting and hope that OSCE will be represented.
- In conclusion, I am looking forward to furthering our cooperation to support our member States in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Thank you for your attention