



Opening statement

by

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at the

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the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on the Protection and Use of

Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes

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Minister Shukeyev,
Minister Szijjarto,
Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to this eighth Meeting of the Parties to the Water Convention in the beautiful city of Astana.

The example of Kazakhstan is a perfect illustration of the topic of our meeting. Kazakhstan shares significant water resources with all its neighbors. It has established cooperation agreements on these waters, all of which are based on the Water Convention, even the agreements with countries which are not Parties to the Convention. Kazakhstan has vast experience in transboundary water cooperation, both in terms of challenges - with the drying up of the Aral Sea - and good practices - such as with the Chu Talas Commission.

This summer, Central Asia suffered a severe water shortage, which challenged the agreed water allocation regime. Other regions face similar scarcity, including areas which have traditionally enjoyed the benefits of an abundance of water. Consequences include 50% decrease in some crop yields in Poland, Germany, Belgium and Scandinavia, record wildfires in Greece, the US and up to the Arctic Circle in Russia and Sweden, and an aggravated humanitarian food crisis in Eastern and Central Africa. Growing scarcity can inflame latent conflicts and drive migration, especially in already fragile countries.

On the flip side, this year we also witnessed massive flooding and landslides in East Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Sudan, Japan, India and elsewhere.

60% of freshwater flow worldwide is in transboundary basins. 153 countries share rivers, lakes or aquifers with their neighbors. These transboundary waters support the incomes and livelihoods of more than 3 billion people and play a crucial role for countless ecosystems. Transboundary water cooperation is therefore vital for peace, sustainable development and economic growth. This is clearly recognized in the 2030 Agenda and in particular its target 6.5.

However, cooperation in transboundary basins is in most cases not fit to deal with existing and future challenges. The majority of international watercourses lack cooperative management arrangements. Many agreements are negotiated but not in force, or not implemented properly. This is apparent from the analysis of the first monitoring of SDG indicator 6.5.2 on transboundary water cooperation, jointly carried out by UNECE and UNESCO, which will be discussed later today. Globally, the average percentage of national transboundary basin area covered by an operational arrangement is only 59 per cent. Merely 17 countries out of 153 reported that cooperation is operational on all their transboundary basins. We have a long way to go.

Almost 30 years ago, we had a vision of how to address transboundary water challenges. A vision that common rules would lay the ground for shared prosperity and peace. A vision that shared waters could build bridges between countries with different socio-economic and political situations, and bring together even countries with tense political relations in a neutral United Nations setting. This was the birth of the Water Convention.

Over the past 25 years, this vision has become a reality.

The Water Convention has significantly enhanced cooperation on the management of shared water resources, promoted economic development, supported regional integration and contributed to the prevention of water-related conflicts in the pan-European region. The first report on the implementation of the Convention, which will be presented later today, provides concrete evidence of the progress achieved and the benefits to Parties.

The Convention has also inspired cooperation beyond the UNECE region, such as the water charters of the Lake Chad and Niger River basins, and the agreement between Kazakhstan and China.

The Convention demonstrates the strength of multilateralism and of the rule of law.

Accessions by Chad and Senegal earlier this year mark another significant milestone in the Convention's evolution.

It is up to us to decide whether to promote water cooperation rather than face a future of water wars. The stakes are high. So are the opportunities.

Never before has transboundary water cooperation had such a high recognition at the global level. It is included in the Sustainable Development Goals, with a dedicated indicator. It was discussed twice at the United Nations Security Council in the past three years. There, numerous Parties mentioned the Water Convention as a tool for conflict prevention. The importance of transboundary water cooperation and the recommendations to accede to the Water Convention and the Watercourses Convention have also been underlined in reports of the High Level Panel on Water and the Global High-Level Panel on Water and Peace. And in 2017, for the first time, the Stockholm Water Prize, one of the most significant prizes in the field of water, was awarded to an international water lawyer. The recipient, Mr. Stephen McCaffrey, is a member of the Convention's Implementation Committee.

There is strong political support for the Convention by Parties which actively promote it, from the European Union, to the Russian Federation, and the newest Party to the Convention, Chad. I encourage other countries and partners to follow these examples.

Building on this political support, the Convention's globalization offers a unique opportunity to accelerate progress worldwide, and address some of the root challenges to transboundary cooperation. I therefore call on all non-Parties to accede to the Convention.

The benefits of a Water Convention with global membership are plentiful.

First of all, the Convention can help mobilize political will. It offers a political forum in the UN to address the multiple challenges facing the sustainable management of shared resources, and to position those challenges high on the global political agenda. This high-level meeting is a perfect example.

The Convention supports the development of joint policy responses to common challenges. In the past decade, for example, it promoted cooperation in adapting to climate change. It fosters the recognition of the benefits of water cooperation, against unilateral policies, and thereby promotes regional integration.

It can also facilitate the mobilization of financial resources for transboundary cooperation and development of transboundary basins. This is visible in the forging of new partnerships with financial institutions, such as the World Bank, the European Investment Bank, the African Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the GEF, to jointly address the crucial topic of financing transboundary basin development and adaptation to climate change

Moreover, the Convention is a catalyzer and amplifier of action. It accelerates progress by enhancing the impact of individual efforts. Countries are not alone with their neighbors in dealing with their basin challenges, but learn each other's lessons, and get inspired to address seemingly insurmountable problems. Partners can upscale the impact of their interventions by promoting lessons and approaches. Building on the Convention's framework and bringing together all stakeholders, activities can be better coordinated and synergies achieved, avoiding duplication and ensuring continuity of effort.

In this regard, the Convention's work on the water-food-energy-ecosystems nexus is pioneering. In many, highly diverse transboundary basins, participatory intersectoral "nexus" assessments have brought together key sectors to jointly identify intersectoral resource management issues. This way, more sustainable and collaborative methods are proposed for development and stewardship of water, energy, land and environmental resources. I encourage wide application of this methodology, which has convincingly demonstrated its value for fostering cooperation and promoting dialogue to reconcile different interests.

Finally, the Convention helps deal with emerging challenges that require different communities to work together. This meeting will adopt new guidelines developed in cooperation with other sectors: the "General technical and organizational guidelines on the

management and retention of firefighting water”, developed with the Industrial Accidents Convention, and a “Words into action guide on addressing water-related disasters and transboundary cooperation”, developed with UNISDR. I call upon countries and basins to use these guidelines.

The strategy for implementing the Convention at the global level, to be adopted at this meeting, aims to make the Convention fit for its new purpose and global nature. Its objective is to rally all actors, regional and global partners, both intergovernmental and non-governmental ones, around the common cause of transboundary water cooperation, for the benefit of all. I therefore call upon all stakeholders, Parties or not, as well as financial institutions, to support the implementation of this strategy.

Now that the amendment of the Convention is operational, and all UN Member States can accede to it, future programmes of work will serve far beyond the pan-European region. This increase in the scope of activities has resource implications, including human resources in the secretariat to support the delivery of the programme of work. You will adopt later this week a programme of work with related extrabudgetary costs, and these are consequently higher than in past programmes of work. I call upon all donors to mobilize such resources.

At the same time, is not only a matter of extrabudgetary resources. For the long-term sustainability of the secretariat, resources from the United Nations regular budget need also to be mobilized. I will personally advocate for this in the discussions on the budget in New York and I count on all of you to make your voices heard in support of this requirement.

Before concluding, I would like to thank all those who are behind the success of the Convention’s implementation so far. If we are here today, it is only thanks to the vision and political commitment of the Parties. I warmly thank Kazakhstan for hosting this memorable meeting and for the great hospitality. And I would also like to recognize Hungary and in particular our Chair, Mr. Peter Kovacs, for his exceptional chairmanship over the last three years. The Bureau’s tireless dedication, and the financial and in-kind support from the other Parties, are the pillars of the Convention’s success.

Cooperation can take us very far – let us all work together to make the vision of the

Convention a reality. Thank you.

