



7th “Environment for Europe” Ministerial Conference

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Opening Statement

by

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on behalf of the European Union and its Member States

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Mr. President, Mr. Prime Minister, Ministers, Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union and its Member States. Let me first thank the Government of Kazakhstan for hosting us in this welcoming and friendly city of Astana.

We are gathered here in order to celebrate a unique occasion of international cooperation *i.e.* the 20th anniversary of the “Environment for Europe” process. We stand in a very different place from the one that existed in June 1991. 20 years ago, when we started the process “Environment for Europe”, the region was challenged with serious environmental deterioration and cooperation among countries was still at the initial stage. Now there has been considerable improvement in all countries and we are still discussing and learning from each other.

The political landscape is radically different. The enlarged European Union now accounts for 27 out of 56 members of the UNECE, and there are more effective structures for cooperation between the EU and our partners in the pan-European Region.

The “Environment for Europe” process is a voluntary platform of countries, international organisations, financial institutions, private sector and civil society for pan-European discussions on sustainable development policy that provides political guidance for improved environmental protection. The EU and its Member States have always supported the strong participation of all Stakeholders in the process. We are convinced that this is one of the main added values of the EfE, showing a good example of implementation of Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, which states the importance of broad stakeholders’ involvement in managing and protecting the environment, sharing of information and lessons learned, as well as capacity-building. The UNECE region decided to implement Principle 10 by adopting the Aarhus Convention on access to information, public participation and access to justice in environmental matters, which can be seen as the most advanced and inspirational model for other regions or at the global level on the matter of public participation in environmental issues.

Facilitating the implementation of the EfE process outcomes, the EU and its Member States have maintained a fruitful and open dialogue with partners, which has proved to be very useful in establishing efficient cooperation patterns, as well as in improving sustainable development policies.

Right across the pan-European Region, the EU with its partner countries has developed a series of structured policies for relations. There are basically five of them:

1. In the European Union we have our environmental rules and regulations;
2. Under the EU Accession Process the countries of South East Europe (including Turkey) and Iceland are aligning with the EU norms and standards;

3. The European Neighbourhood Policy has given a more structured approach to our cooperation with our Eastern Neighbours, bringing top level government support to the environmental issues. Reaching out beyond the environment ministries is essential for the implementation and support of environmental protection;
4. The EU-Central Asia Strategy is a framework through which environmental cooperation can also be pursued with this important partner region, through the implementation of the Platform on Environment and Water agreed between the EU and Central Asian Countries;
5. The EU Water Initiative is a partnership highlighting the political importance of reaching internationally agreed targets on water supply and sanitation within the context of an integrated approach to water resources management with specific work programmes for each of its regional components – Africa, Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, Mediterranean and Latin America. In this context, it is worth mentioning that within the framework of this Initiative the EU supports the so-called National Policy Dialogues in the EECCA countries.

The EU resources and finance geared to supporting these policies give us an opportunity that should not be missed. Regular summits and other political events with attendance of the environment ministers are other benefits of such an approach. By channelling our future cooperation into these sub-regional activities we can ensure that the progress of the last 20 years is embedded and built upon.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

The EU and its Member States would like to recall that within the EfE process a significant number of important decisions, among which the establishment of the Environmental Action Programme for Central and Eastern Europe Task Force (EAP TF) and the Project Preparation Committee (PPC), the creation of new Regional Environmental Centers (RECs) for countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, the introduction of the Environmental Performance Review Programme, and the set-up of pan-European assessment reports on the state of the environment, have been taken and are only a few examples of what has been decided by heads of delegations at previous Ministerial Conferences.

Moreover, through the EfE process important legal as well as “soft law” instruments have been developed and adopted. The MEAs, developed under the process, have shaped in crucial areas the legal frameworks of many countries in the UNECE region. Policy tools and legal instruments developed in the framework of the EfE process have greatly contributed to the preparation of appropriate national legislation and have complemented and promoted environmental governance by strengthening national environmental institutions and policy instruments.

Today, a very visible example is the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS). This is now a flagship project of the Eastern Partnership, the regional component of the European Neighbourhood policy, with the top level support that comes with it. With the ongoing development of the SEIS in the EU and accession countries, you can see that most of the region is covered. Your support this week will begin to complete the picture as we bring Central Asia into this developing initiative. The Europe’s Environment Assessment of Assessment published today provides concrete evidence of the need to extend the SEIS.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

The EU and its Member States recognize green economy as a major vehicle for sustainable growth. Green economy is part of the broader concept of sustainable development, but does not replace it. It can help to deliver growth, decent jobs, eradicate poverty while increasing resource efficiency, preserving our natural capital and improving social welfare and environmental quality. Thanks to a green economy model, economic growth will come about in different ways: through investment and innovation, more efficient use of natural and financial resources, by preventing damage to the environment and human health, identifying the value of ecosystem services and biodiversity. We know that there is no “one-size-fits-all” model. Green economy policies, while serving the common goal of allowing growth preserving the environment, have to be designed nationally, sub-nationally and regionally, taking into account needs and specific circumstances of individual countries.

At the same time, the EU and its Member States recognize the growing importance of the sustainable water management at global and regional scale, which implies further strengthening of cooperation at different levels. The value of water is rising in all regions of the UNECE. Ensuring access to safe drinking water and sanitation has been high on the agenda for a long time. The EU and its Member States have taken a number of actions in direction of sustainable water management and we also recognize that the "Astana Water Actions" will provide a remarkable set of commitments to be carried out throughout the region. We would like to share our experiences and best practices during the thematic round-table interactive discussions.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

While tackling environmental challenges and promoting broad horizontal environmental cooperation, a pillar of sustainable development in the UNECE region has not yet been fully achieved. Old legacies and old structures are still a big problem. Environmental policies must be driven by strong public awareness and involvement. It requires further political efforts, stronger engagement of all stakeholders and an enhanced focus on implementation of the outcomes of the Efe Ministerial Conferences by relevant responsible actors in the period between the Conferences.

Now, we are here to take further decisions which will continue to improve the environmental landscape in the UNECE region. One of the important decisions is to establish a regular process of environmental assessment and to develop SEIS across the region. It is a political decision which will give the UNECE a status of front-runner in environmental assessment. It will also be a huge challenge for the EEA and its partner organizations but we trust that the end-result will be extremely valuable. The Second Assessment of Transboundary Rivers, Lakes and Groundwaters in the UNECE region valuably provides the most up-to-date and comprehensive assessment of pressing issues related to managing transboundary waters and helps to guide further action. It is important that such region-wide assessment process continues under the UNECE Water Convention to benchmark progress in the use and protection of shared waters. Deciding to invite UNECE to conduct a third cycle of the Environmental Performance Review Programs and extending the mandate of the Environmental Action Programme Task Force are also worth noting.

The EU and its Member States also believe that the RECs network should continue to play a role in the preparatory process for the Conference and should be encouraged to play a greater role in the achievement of the overall EfE process' objectives and priorities. We acknowledge their important contribution in the preparation of the Assessment of the Assessments and express our belief that they will be crucial actors in the extension of the SEIS in the region, working together with other partners.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

The EU and its Member States welcome the initiative taken by Kazakhstan in presenting the Green Bridge Partnership Programme intended to contribute to the shift towards a green economy that leads to sustainable development by stimulating investments. At the same time, we recognize that further work needs to be done in developing this project. While we appreciate the bottom-up approach and the underlying objectives that inspire this initiative, there are still key features in this proposal that continue to raise questions for us, in particular the governance aspects.

We believe that this Conference and its outcomes will positively contribute to a successful outcome of Rio+20, particularly with respect to green growth and to enhancing International Environmental Governance, thereby aiming at for a strong environmental pillar within the broader context of strengthening overall sustainable development governance, and EU will be supportive of initiatives which will contribute to such an outcome.

On behalf of the EU and its Member States, I wish you all the best in guiding our discussions here in Astana and in ensuring they lead rapidly to concrete action, and I assure you that the EU and its Member States will do their best to contribute to a successful outcome of the 7th Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe".

Thank you for your attention.