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Draft Category I document for consideration by the Executive Committee

**INITIATIVE ON STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
 (“BELGRADE SEA INITIATIVE”)**

Proposed by Armenia, Belarus and Moldova

1. The Governments of Armenia, Belarus and Moldova propose adoption by Ministers of Environment from Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA) of a voluntary initiative on strategic environmental assessment (SEA), as a means of promoting sustainable development in EECCA. The initiative would provide for networking among government officials so as to develop capacity for the introduction of SEA and the implementation of the UNECE Protocol on SEA.

I. Background

2. The Third Ministerial Conference “Environment for Europe” (Sofia, 1995) welcomed an initiative on environmental impact assessment (EIA), which aimed to accelerate implementation of the Environmental Action Programme for Central and Eastern Europe (EAP). This initiative, later known as the “Sofia EIA Initiative”, was implemented by Croatia and the Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) in 1995-2003 through a series of comparative studies, subregional workshops for senior government officials and policy recommendations for the “Environment for Europe” and “Environment and Health” processes, and for the Meeting of the Parties to the UNECE Convention on EIA in a Transboundary Context (Espoo, 1991). Activities under the Sofia EIA Initiative also significantly accelerated debates on the introduction of SEA in Central and Eastern Europe and provided subregional support for the launching of the negotiations on the Protocol on SEA to supplement the Espoo Convention.

3. An extraordinary meeting of the Parties to the Espoo Convention on was held in Kiev during the “Environment for Europe” Ministerial Conference, 2003. The Meeting of the Parties adopted the Protocol on SEA and emphasized “the importance of capacity building for the effective implementation and application of the provisions of this Protocol” (MP.EIA/2003/2, para. 7). Further, Ministers in Kiev declared “We invite all interested UNECE States to sign this Protocol and to work actively for its ratification and implementation” (ECE/CEP/94/Rev.1, para. 34).

4. Ministers at the Kiev Conference also adopted the “EECCA Environment Strategy”,¹ with the objective to “strengthen efforts of these countries in environmental protection and facilitating partnership and cooperation between EECCA countries and other countries of the UNECE region, including all stakeholders”. Objective IV of this strategy is to “Integrate Environmental Considerations into the Development of Key Economic Sectors”. The preamble to the Protocol recognizes the importance of SEA for the integration of environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption of plans and programmes and, to the extent appropriate, policies and legislation that may have significant environmental effects. Thus capacity development for the implementation of the Protocol on SEA is fully in line with and supports implementation of the EECCA Strategy.

5. In addition, SEA leads to better environmental protection and management and promotes sustainable development. It also strengthens the process of making plans and programmes and, to the extent appropriate, policies and legislation, thereby providing benefits for planning authorities, governments and other stakeholders. The procedural benefits of SEA include increased efficiency of the planning process and improved governance.²

¹ Environmental Partnerships in the UNECE Region: Environment Strategy for Countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (ECE/CEP/105/Rev.1)

² For an in-depth discussion of the benefits of SEA, see *Benefits of Strategic Environmental Assessment*, by UNDP and the REC.

6. In 2004, the third meeting of the Parties to the Espoo Convention, held in conjunction with the first meeting of the Signatories to the Protocol on SEA, adopted a workplan that included activities supporting capacity development in SEA. The Meeting of the Parties also encouraged “the Signatories to the Protocol to develop capacity for its ratification and implementation on the basis of demonstrated need, giving particular support to the countries of South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and, wherever possible, working with regional institutions to make expertise and resources available as necessary” (ECE/MP.EIA/6, annex XIII, para. 16). That Meeting also anticipated the early ratification of the Protocol and its coming into force (ibid, para. 7).

7. Subsequently, UNDP, with support from the REC and the Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC), has implemented an SEA capacity-development initiative.³ This initiative has been undertaken in collaboration with the UNECE secretariat and the Meeting of the Parties to the Espoo Convention. Together with Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine (signatories to the Protocol) and Belarus, these organizations have been working to develop capacity for the introduction of SEA and the implementation of the Protocol, resulting in:⁴

- (a) National capacity-development needs analyses
- (b) A subregional overview of capacity-development needs
- (c) National pilot projects
- (d) National capacity-development strategies⁵
- (e) Subregional initiatives to support the national capacity-development strategies⁶

8. This work identified the absence of a mechanism in EECCA for the mobilization of support for countries in their implementation of the Protocol and the alignment of their SEA-like systems with internationally accepted SEA principles. The priority issues of concern were:

- (a) Limited capacity of the responsible national environmental authorities to work on the Protocol’s transposition and on the preparation of methodological guidance;
- (b) Limited experience with SEA that would provide examples of effective procedures and analytical approaches, which would meet the requirements of the Protocol; and
- (c) Limited openness of the planning systems, which poses obstacles for carrying out assessment and consulting relevant authorities and the public during the elaboration of plans and programmes.

9. Capacity development is continuing and being carried forward by the above-mentioned organizations and others in the five countries and elsewhere in EECCA, though improved results would be achieved if the work were to be coordinated through means provided by the “Environment for Europe” process. The current partners in the SEA capacity-development initiative would therefore welcome support and endorsement of their activities by the Belgrade Conference.

II. Priority actions⁷

³ ENVSEC is an initiative originally established by UNEP, UNDP and OSCE, joined by UNECE and the REC in 2006, and supported financially by various donors.

⁴ For documentation on these activities, see http://www.unece.org/env/sea/eccca_capacity.htm.

⁵ Strategies were developed in Armenia, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. Georgia prepared a *Programme for the period 2005-2009: a framework for future SEA activities in Georgia* with support from the Dutch Environmental Assessment Commission. For more information, see http://www.unece.org/env/sea/eccca_capacity.htm.

⁶ Comments have been invited on the “draft for consultation” *Proposed Subregional Initiatives to Support National Strategies for the Implementation of the SEA Protocol in EECCA*.

⁷ Consultations are continuing on the strategies and the subregional initiatives, so minor changes may be envisaged.

10. The national strategies (Armenia, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine) identify short-term priority actions, typically to be undertaken in the period 2006-2008, and longer-term actions. The national short-term priority actions are:

- (a) Elaboration or modification of national regulations and laws on SEA (Armenia, Moldova, Ukraine)
- (b) Undertaking pilot SEAs (Armenia, Ukraine)
- (c) Training and networking (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine)
- (d) Raising awareness of SEA and its benefits (Belarus, Moldova)

11. The subregional initiatives, proposed by the REC, with support from the UNECE secretariat and UNDP, are:

- (a) Networking of government officials responsible SEA system development
- (b) Networking of EIA and SEA practitioners in EECCA
- (c) Subregional projects supporting national capacity-development activities in the target countries and awareness raising of the SEA Protocol across EECCA

12. The proposed Belgrade SEA Initiative would correspond broadly to the networking of government officials, identified above.

13. If this initiative receives support from the Ministers from EECCA, it is proposed that the EAP Task Force be invited to develop a more detailed work programme. The work programme should be designed to reinforce on-going work and to accelerate the implementation of the EAP. As far as possible, activities should be led by EECCA countries and emphasize the sharing of experience East-East. Donors, international organizations and financing institutions should also be fully involved, sharing their experience and providing much needed support for subregional and country-specific activities. Results of the work should be reported to the next "Environment for Europe" Ministerial Conference.

14. Possible actions to be implemented under this initiative could include informal meetings for senior government officials of these countries,⁸ policy recommendations, comparative studies and more open workshops for the dissemination of information, related to the following issues in implementation of the Protocol in EECCA:

- (a) Development of effective SEA procedures;
- (b) National transposition of the Protocol requirements;
- (c) Development of appropriate SEA guidelines;
- (d) Developing necessary capacities for SEA;
- (e) Evaluating SEA processes; and
- (f) Explaining benefits of SEA to decision-makers.

15. To this end, the Governments of Armenia, Belarus and Moldova invite Ministers of Environment from EECCA to adopt the "Belgrade SEA Initiative" below.

⁸ Informal meetings might apply the 'Chatham House Rule': "When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed." See <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk> for more information.

III. Belgrade SEA Initiative

We, Ministers of Environment from Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA),

Recognizing the importance of integrating environmental considerations into the development of key economic sectors in our countries to protect the environment and facilitate partnership and cooperation between EECCA countries and other countries of the UNECE region, including all stakeholders,

Recognizing also the importance of strategic environmental assessment (SEA) for the integration of environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption of plans and programmes and, to the extent appropriate, policies and legislation that may have significant environmental effects,

Appreciating the signing of the UNECE Protocol on SEA by those States wishing to share a common legal framework for SEA,

Welcoming progress so far in developing capacity for the implementation of the Protocol in our countries and advances in regional and subregional cooperation in this area,

1. Agree the importance of a voluntary initiative on the networking of government officials responsible for SEA system development in our countries, through facilitating the sharing of experience and knowledge among EECCA countries that demonstrate serious interest in ratification of or accession to the Protocol.
2. Invite EECCA countries and other stakeholders to join this open-ended initiative.
3. Request Armenia and Belarus to jointly lead the initiative, by providing political leadership and chairing its meetings, and invite UNECE, UNDP and the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe to support our countries through the provision of a joint secretariat for the initiative.
4. Also invite donors, international organizations and financing institutions to be involved fully, sharing their experience and providing much needed support for subregional and country-specific activities.