Mr. Chairman,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union and the Acceding Countries. The Associated countries of Romania and Turkey declare that they align themselves with this statement.

The adoption of the "Environmental Strategy for Countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia - Strategic Framework" will be undoubtedly one of the most important achievements of this Conference. In this respect the EU would like to thank the Deputy Environment Minister of Georgia Mr Zaal Lomtadze for his tireless efforts in developing and taking this Strategy forward.

This Strategy should be seen as an overarching framework for finding solutions to common environmental problems for the East Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia countries by facilitating cooperation and the development of synergies between them and other countries of the UNECE region. This Strategy will also serve as the basis for further developing action programmes and sub-regional partnerships, with the active involvement of all stakeholders, including the private sector.

The most important element of this Strategy is that it has been developed under the initiative of the 12 Ministers of Environment of the EECCA region as a response to address, in a concerted way, the challenges faced in order to create an efficient, targeted and strategic improvement of environmental conditions and promote a development where environment has equal footing with the other two pillars of sustainability.

This Conference is happening at an important junction in our history, with on the one hand the enlargement of the European Union and on the other hand, the need to translate the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation into regional European programmes. In this context, a bigger concentration of efforts towards the EECCA countries in improving environmental conditions is required. This refocus has been decided in Aarhus in 1998, it has been articulated in the Hague in 2002 by EECCA Environment Ministers and it has been confirmed in Johannesburg with the successful launching of the Environmental Partnership Strategy.

The EU strongly supports this initiative. We believe that a common strategy for the EECCA countries will complement subregional, bilateral and multilateral programmes and projects, whilst recognising the geographic, political and environmental differences between countries in this region.

The key objectives and areas for action that have been identified under this Strategy are those where the EAP Task Force and the Regional Environmental Centers could draw on their expertise and experience. These bodies would indeed bring an added value with respect to the bilateral cooperation of donors. In this respect, the key areas selected, in line with the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, touch upon critical issues such as policy and institutional reform, integration of environmental considerations in sectoral policies, creation of an enabling environment for increasing investment, promotion of environmental democracy and participatory processes as well as transboundary cooperation.
This process should be driven by EECCA countries themselves. Increased ownership and commitment for implementing this Strategy by the EECCA counties will be the single most important factor for moving from goals and words to action.

In this respect, effective implementation is crucial. The EAP Task Force and the Project preparation Committee, with the support of bilateral and multilateral donors should work together to support the achievement of the Strategy’s objectives in a timely manner. The role of international organisations in this process should be an active one in order to provide technical support to the implementation of the Environmental Partnerships Strategy, in accordance with their respective mandates. We consider it important to transfer experience and know-how from countries acceding to the EU to their Eastern European, Caucasus and Central Asian partners: to this aim, the Regional Environment Center (REC) for Central Eastern Europe should play a useful role, cooperating with the EAP Task Force, in support of the implementation of the Strategy.

Mr. Chairman, the European Union reaffirms its commitment to assist in carrying the process forward and in contributing in a constructive and progressive manner to the effective implementation of the Environmental Partnerships’ Strategy for the EECCA region. Regional and sub-regional initiatives are stimulating new forms of cooperation, such the DABLAS Initiative, the EU Initiatives on Water and Energy, the Carpathian Convention and the Central Asian Initiative on Environment, Water and Security. Maintaining the momentum from Johannesburg, we will support the development and implementation of partnership initiatives, in a coordinated manner, which are demand driven, output oriented and based on a multi-stakeholder approach. In this context, we anticipate that the EU’s Water for Life initiative for the EECCA countries and the EU Renewable Energy "Coalition” will contribute to bring about true change in the region.