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Statement

by

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Executive Secretary

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at

**at the opening of the
8th “Environment for Europe”
Ministerial Conference**

Batumi, 8-10 June 2016

Mr. Chairperson,
Hon Excellency, Prime-Minister Kvirikashvili
Excellencies, Ministers
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the 8th Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference in beautiful Batumi. It is a special pleasure for me to be in Georgia, a country with which UNECE has excellent cooperation and which has had many impressive environmental accomplishments in the recent years. We are in a country with an astonishing beautiful nature, and with a government keen to preserve it. On behalf of the UN, I would like to warmly acknowledge the great contribution of the people and the Government of Georgia to the preparation and organization of this Conference. Almost one year ago, I met His Excellency, Prime-Minister Kvirikashvili in New York. I expressed to him my confidence that the Batumi Ministerial would become a success thanks to the commitment of Georgia. Today, it is a great pleasure to see how perfectly everything is organized, and I am touched by the excellent hospitality of Georgia here in the charming city of Batumi.

I am very impressed by the large number of delegations here and I warmly welcome all of you. The engagement of so many representatives of governments, civil society, international organizations, academia, and other stakeholders demonstrates the strong commitment to continue the successful environmental cooperation in the UNECE region and it allows us to unite to turn the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development into action

I am also most grateful to our partner organizations – UNEP, OECD, WHO, EEA, UNDP and many others – that have greatly facilitated the preparations for Batumi. Thank you for the excellent cooperation. We are – as we say in the UN – delivering as one. And I am grateful to the European ECO-Forum for their help in building a strong dialogue with civil society before Batumi and now here in Batumi.

As we begin our Conference, I wish to look back for a moment. The Environment for Europe process began a quarter century ago, at a time when the region was deeply divided along social, economic, and political lines. We must pay tribute to the bold vision and strong dedication of the individuals who were behind the first EfE Conference at Dobříš Castle in 1991. This first conference created a platform for peaceful dialogue and cooperation on environmental issues. They understood that environmental problems cross borders. They understood that the nature should unite us. Over the past 25 years, the dialogue has delivered positive results – for our citizens, for our nature, for the environment. It has helped to build friendships and partnerships – it has led to strong political solutions and environmental progress – in countries and between countries. No citizen, no plant, no animal, no river, lake, forest or field has been left untouched by the cooperation created by the Environment for Europe process.

Indeed, the EfE process has an impressive and long list of tangible achievements. Together we have:

- Created several multilateral environmental agreements and other policy instruments and initiatives that have yielded significant results;
- Established the UNECE Environmental Performance Review Programme, which continues to assist countries in improving environmental policies and practices
- Created the periodic assessments on the state of the environment in the pan-European region;
- Well-functioning institutional mechanisms for cooperation, such as the Environmental Action Programme Task Force and the Regional Environmental Centres;
- Cross-sectoral activities and policy integration in areas such as energy efficiency, education for sustainable development and greening the economy;

And last but not least,

- Enhanced cooperation between Governments and civil society organizations.

Today, here in Batumi, the EfE process will continue to help us improve the environment throughout the region. I am convinced that the EfE process has the potential to do even more.

And I am convinced that the EfE process can become a strong pillar in our effort to implement the historic and visionary Sustainable Development Goals. We can use the EfE process to turn these global goals into concrete policies, principles, practices – and we will take the first steps to achieve this here in Batumi on issues as air quality and green economy. We can use the EfE process to ensure follow-up and review. There is no appetite for new processes or institutions, but we have the EfE – let us make it a strong mechanism for keeping track of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals with the Shared Environmental Information System and the review mechanisms. And let's establish a clear link to the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, which will now be further developed by our member States.

We have two major themes to discuss. Our theme on the green economy is well placed to build momentum towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Global expansion and economic growth have improved millions of lives but exploited the planet at an unprecedented pace. We must to change our thinking fundamentally. We need to redirect consumption habits, investments, innovation and trade towards economic progress that is socially inclusive, resource efficient, carbon neutral and does not degrade the environment.

The good news is that we have the science and technology to support this transformation. The World Economic Forum calls it the fourth industrial revolution, right now, were new solutions – from advanced renewable energy solutions and smart meters to electric and autonomous cars are starting to transform our energy and transport systems. Were the Internet of all things can help us track materials, achieve huge resource efficiencies and create a circular economy where we regenerate natural capital and capture the carbon. We can use information technology – from big-data to blockchains - to get information, share information, ensure transparency and to hold countries and companies accountable. But this new revolution also carries new risks and dangers of severe exclusion and environmental degradation. We can only succeed if we address these complex processes systematically, with a whole-economy, whole-society approach. We must, as indicated, by the acronym for the **Batumi Initiative on Green Economy, think big.** The fourth industrial revolution must be a sustainable development revolution.

For our other main theme - clean air - the urgency is obvious. More and more frequently, we hear of extreme air pollution that makes breathing difficult and triggers health emergencies. We lose millions of lives every year and trillions of dollars because of polluted air. We get sick when we breathe, there is considerable damage to our fields and forests, we lose biodiversity and natural beauty because of air filled with harmful substances. The assessment report under the Air Convention is a strong encouragement - we can clean the air - but also a strong reminder that there is a long way to go before we can promise our citizens that they will not risk to die too early because of air pollution.

To take informed decisions, we need access to reliable information. It is encouraging to see how the Shared Environmental Information System is strengthening the collection of critical data across the pan-European region. It is good to see the Pan-European regional assessment as part of GEO6, a collaboration of UNEP and UNECE. The second report on the implementation of the Astana Water Action will provide useful insights into the follow-up of decisions of the previous EfE Ministerial in Astana. We must keep each other accountable for making progress.

And then we must share the knowledge we have – not least with our children and young people. They will be the key drivers of change. Therefore, it is good to see the fruitful cooperation under the UNECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development. 9 out of 10 countries have sustainable development in their national education policies and almost 9 out of 10 have it in the curriculums. I welcome the dialogue here between Environment and Education Ministries. It is yet another achievement of the EfE process.

We are in a beautiful city. But as we say in my country, first work, then pleasure. We have important decisions to adopt, actions to take.

- i) The **Pan-European Strategic Framework for Greening the Economy and the Batumi Initiative on Green Economy – BIG-E** will help countries in their transition to green economy and towards achieving specific Sustainable Development Goals.
 - ii) The **Batumi Action for Cleaner Air (BACA)** includes specific commitments to ratify and implement the latest protocols to the Air Convention that will have a strong, measurable impact on air quality and human health.
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iii) And the Batumi Ministerial Declaration marks the culmination of the Conference and will guide the follow-up and further actions. I urge all member States to agree on a bold and visionary declaration. We cannot achieve the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals if we do not aim high.

I am confident that the results of our Conference will further strengthen our cooperation on the environment and benefit both our people and the planet. We will strengthen our friendship and partnership allowing our common nature to unite us. Let us keep alive the spirit of those who created the Environment for Europe process.

Welcome to Batumi.

Thank you.
