

High-level segment of the fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health (Belgrade, 19 November 2019)

High-level session: “The Protocol on Water and Health: catalysing sustainable development in the pan-European region”

Compilation of statements from the floor

Statements by Lithuania, Norway, Croatia, Delegation of the European Union to Serbia and Portugal

Statement of Lithuania

Ms. Kristina Garuolienė, Vice-minister of Health

Being the Party of the UNECE Protocol on Water and Health, Lithuania would like to stress the benefits and added value for the whole Protocol Community. The Protocol offers greater cooperation opportunities that are relevant for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular the Goal 6 Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation.

At the same time, the Agenda for Sustainable Development creates an unique opportunity to address issues that the Protocol focuses on as well, such as water security and scarcity. The Protocol provides the framework for cooperation on coordinated systems for surveillance, early warning systems, contingency plans, and responses to outbreaks and water-related incidents. These measures are extremely important for sustainable water management.

What is more, some activities under the Protocol refer to the implementation of the EU Directives on Drinking Water, Urban Waste Water. It also contributes to preparation of river basin management plans.

Our country manages its water resources quite well. Lithuania is among EU leaders in terms of water purity and waste water treatment. It almost totally meets EU requirements for drinking water. However, water security is of special relevance to Lithuania. We keep emphasizing that one of the major challenges for water quality, natural resources and river basins come from irresponsible development of industrial projects. Taking into consideration the water-energy nexus, I would like to stress the importance of sustainable planning, building and operating of water and energy infrastructure while preserving and improving water resources.

Lithuania has been rising the issues regarding effective water management and protection of water resources since 2009, when plans for nuclear power plants in neighbouring countries became officially known. Such facilities as nuclear power plants in Belarus and Kaliningrad district will pose an additional impact on the Neris and Nemunas Rivers as these facilities will become additional objects using the water that is necessary for cooling of reactors, as well as will pose an additional pollution. Drastic impact of climate change on Neris River during two last years makes it questionable if it is able to withstand additional impact. Worth mentioning that 72 proc. of the total area of the Nemunas River Basin is situated in Lithuania. The pollutants transported through the river eventually fall into the Baltic Sea, so thermal, hydrological, radiological and chemical impact on the rivers is particularly important in terms of environmental protection.

Rivers have no borders and irresponsible use of water resources results in painful consequences for everyone. Lithuania always encourages its neighbouring countries to establish, implement and further strengthen cooperative legal and institutional frameworks. While doing so, we also underscore the need to improve water monitoring and sharing of relevant data in the context of information – especially the information that enables reducing risks from irresponsible use of transboundary basin water.

In this regard, the Protocol on Water and Health shall be considered as a living international instrument to respond to modern challenges and bringing countries together as partners.

Protocol on Water and Health is important for us:

1. in case of transboundary rivers and Baltic Sea
2. in context of inter-institutional co-operation
3. in increasing the population proportions served by collective systems of drinking-water supply and sanitation
4. in tackling water supply and sanitation problems in rural areas.

Thanks for the possibility to take part in the consultation process and for the interesting discussions in the March and November Meetings as well as for the possibility to learn more on experiences of other Baltic States. Thank you also for the information provided including the various publications.

Statement of Norway

Mr. Kjetil Tveitan, Ministry of Health and Care Services

Madam Chair,

I would like to congratulate the government of Serbia who is our host for this meeting and thank you for all the arrangements done to make this meeting such a success. I would also like to thank the secretariat, from both the UNECE and the WHO side, for the preparations done for this meeting.

I would like to start by saying that Norway has an abundance of water from nature's side. Still, we have our challenges. The most dominant one is that we have a very old network of pipelines allowing for in average 30 percent of treated water to leak out before it reaches the consumer. In no other area of production would one allow such a loss.

We also face new challenges because of climate change, which brings heavier and more uneven precipitation, which again brings new strains to the pipelines.

In the summer of this year, we had an incident with contaminated water in Askøy, in the western part of Norway, where approximately 2000 people got sick. This brought new attention to the challenges and to the targets set for Norway under the Protocol of Water and Health. We are, among other initiatives, working on a new joint initiative between the State, water producers and the supply industry on how to increase the pace in renewing our pipe lines. New initiatives are expected to be included in a revised action plan on how to reach the targets in 2020.

I would also like to mention that Norway has been active on the international scene through our participation in the work programme of the Protocol regarding water-related disease surveillance and management, and in strengthening water surveillance. We have also been active within the Nordic Baltic network on drinking water and sanitation. The next meeting in this network is not too

far away, it will be held on 12th and 13th of December in Lithuania. And I can promise that we will follow up on our commitments also for the coming years.

Thank you very much.

Statement of Croatia

Mr. Mario Šiljeg, State Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Energy

Dear Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to greet you on behalf of the Ministry of Environment and Energy and the Ministry of Health, the bodies in charge of implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health in the Republic of Croatia, on behalf of Minister Dr. Tomislav Čorić and Minister Dr. Milan Kujundžić and on my own behalf.

The Republic of Croatia is a Party to the Protocol on Water and Health, which was ratified in 2006. In the post-ratification period, and particularly since joining the European Union, the Republic of Croatia has achieved significant progress in the field of water management, raising the standard of provision of water services and ensuring access to water services.

The Republic of Croatia has a long tradition in the field of water management. Aware of today's challenges, it strongly supports the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a universal agenda for development and a global platform for addressing the key issues. In our efforts to meet the specific Sustainable Development Goals related to improving drinking water and sanitation services access and the preservation of health and general well-being, we make use of the tools provided by the Protocol on Water and Health.

In a comprehensive approach to achieve the set goals, activities are continuously taken to improve the legislative framework, with such activities intensifying particularly since joining the EU. We can therefore state that satisfactory compliance has been achieved. In July this year, a set of water-related acts has been adopted, including a particularly significant Act on Water Services. This is a reform act aiming to improve the overall state in the sector of water services and improve the implementation of projects for the development of water utility infrastructure. The act will enable the integration of the existing public providers of water services into a singular public provider in a service area (forming around 40 areas), ensuring they are able to implement a development project. The integration of public providers is a necessity due to a highly fragmented sector of water services.

In the Republic of Croatia, the access to a public water supply is enabled to a high extent (at 94%), but that is not so for public wastewater collection (only 56%). Further improvements require an appropriate institutional structure of public providers of water services and the construction of drinking water and wastewater infrastructure. A large investment cycle for development projects co-financed from the EU is ongoing, with the aim of achieving compliance with the standards laid down by the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive and the Directive on the quality of water intended for human consumption. In the 2014-2020 programming period, a € 1.049 billion grant is available to Croatia from the Operational Programme Competitiveness and Cohesion. Under the current Operational Programme, 46 drinking water and wastewater projects (with a total value of € 2.5 billion) have been approved, with eligible costs of almost € 2 billion and EU co-financing of € 1.4 billion, accounting for 133.7% of the total allocation. Upon the completion of such projects from the current and a subsequent investment cycle, it is expected that an appropriate standard and quality of water services provision will be achieved, in particular for public wastewater collection service.

Improving the standard of provision of water services contributes not only to the protection of the environment, but also to the protection and preservation of human health and to the overall well-being, continuing the long tradition. It is well known that our own, Dr Andrija Štampar, made a significant contribution to the field of preventive medicine and preservation of human health. He took part in the development of the World Health Organization Constitution and chaired the First World Health Assembly held in Geneva in 1948.

A high standard of public water supply service in Croatia is reflected in the rare occurrence of water-borne diseases, which is the result of committed efforts by the competent bodies and the fact that the Republic of Croatia recognized the importance of managing risks in public water supply as far back as in 2004. Nevertheless, further improvements are needed in the local and individual water supply systems, which are under a certain risk in terms of ensuring an appropriate standard of sanitary quality of water intended for human consumption. In the next period, a wide public health education campaign is needed to inform the population supplied with water from such systems, as well as the implementation of measures that are available to the central and local government bodies.

Furthermore, the new Act on Water Services lays down a new measure for improved access to water intended for human consumption by obliging a public provider to ensure a water supply volume of 50 l per day per household member if a temporary or a more permanent interruption occurs in the delivery of water from the public water supply system (even if it is caused by the user).

A novelty introduced by the new Water Act is the establishment of the Water Institute, a scientific institution aiming to improve the monitoring and management of data about the status of surface waters and groundwater. The ultimate goal is the establishment of an institutional framework which will enable better coordination of activities implemented under the Water Framework Directive and other water-related directives, which is at the same time one of the goals of amending the Directive on the quality of water intended for human consumption.

To conclude, the Republic of Croatia is continually striving to improve the drinking water and sanitation services as well as stay current with the newest recommendations, as reflected in the activities and legislation implemented so far.

Thank you for your attention!

Statement of Delegation of the European Union to Serbia

Mr. Antoine Avignon, Program Manager Environment and Climate Change

It is my great honor to greet you on behalf of the European Union, and it is a pleasure to be with you today.

Thanks to the organizers for your kind invitation to the European Union.

When we talk about Environment and Climate Change on a global scale, we can see the EU playing a leading role worldwide in protecting the environment and promoting Climate Action.

Over the past decades the European Union has put in place in Member States a broad range of environmental legislation and has ensured constant monitoring, support to research and innovation and ensured law enforcement.

Progress is visible: today, EU citizens enjoy some of the best water quality in the world: the sector provides clean, safe and healthy drinking water to 95% of people living in Europe.

It also ensures that waste water is returned to nature in a way that preserves our environment and our resources.

As our planet is facing unprecedented challenges to its environment and climate, the EU wants to do more for environmental protection and climate change mitigation.

With this vision in mind, the new Commission will focus more on environmental protection and climate action with the Green Deal.

- Along with our climate-neutrality commitments for 2050, we have to be more ambitious when it comes to our 2030 emission reduction target. This should increase to at least 50% by 2030, up from the 40% currently agreed.
- In parallel, we want to lead international negotiations to increase the level of ambition of other major emitters by 2021. A comprehensive plan to increase the EU's target for 2030 towards 55% in a responsible way should be put forward.
- The European Green Deal can only work if it brings people along and supports the most affected, such as those in industrial, coal and energy intensive regions. In this spirit, a new Just Transition Fund should be put in place.
- Europe must lead the world when it comes to protecting our biodiversity. Mainstreaming biodiversity priorities across all policy areas, notably trade, industry, agriculture and maritime affairs will be a priority.
- The Commission will also work on our zero-pollution ambition. This will require a wide-ranging approach looking at air, water, and noise pollution from transport, agriculture and food production, water quality, hazardous chemicals and other key areas.
- Reducing the carbon footprint is key to our transport sector to ensure that the blue economy contributes to decarbonisation.
- Circular economy will be central to EU Green Deal. As well as on the new 'Farm to Fork' strategy for sustainable food. This will cover every step in the food chain from production to consumption, looking at consumer information, food safety, animal and plant health, fisheries and the agri-food sector.
- EU tax policies should enable the EU to deliver on our climate ambitions. This will include the work on the Carbon Border Tax, as well as the review of the Energy Taxation Directive.
- EU's long-term climate-neutral commitment will be reaffirmed, to ensure that we use all of the tools at our disposal and work on climate awareness and behaviour change.
- The first European Climate Law will be drafted to enshrine the 2050 climate-neutrality target into legislation.
- Implementation will be stepped up for the legislative instruments on climate, namely the Emissions Trading System, the Effort Sharing Regulation and the regulation on land use, land-use change and forestry.

- A new European Climate Pact — bringing together regions, local communities, civil society, industry and schools should be established.

This is what the new Commission will do in the coming years, and I think it is important that we are all aware of these challenges. The EU will look for partnership with the Western Balkan countries to mirror the Green deal into the Green Agenda for the Western Balkan.

In water and waste water, as many of you already know, the EU policies rely on the famous Water Directives, such as the Water Framework Directive, the Drinking Water Directive and the Urban Waste Water Directive.

The Water Framework Directive is the most comprehensive instrument of EU water policy. Its main objective is to protect and enhance freshwater resources with the aim of achieving good status of EU waters; its scope extends beyond lakes, rivers, and groundwaters to transitional and coastal waters.

The drinking water policy ensures that water intended for human consumption can be consumed safely on a life-long basis. This represents a high level of health protection.

Main pillars of the policy are to:

- Ensure that drinking water quality is controlled through standards based on the latest scientific evidence;
- Secure an efficient and effective monitoring, assessment and enforcement of drinking water quality;
- Provide the consumers with adequate, timely and appropriately information;
- Contribute to the broader EU water and health policy;

Treatment of urban waste water from our homes and workplaces is fundamental to ensuring public health and environmental quality.

To this end, the main objective of the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive and equivalent national legislation for non-EU countries, is to protect surface waters from the adverse effects of waste water discharges

Thanks to EU investments these last decades in water sector, the EU citizens homes and workplaces are more and more connected to water treatment facilities:

The connection rate to waste water treatment facilities varies between about 80 and 90 % in Finland or Sweden, while proportion of the population connected to tertiary treatment ranges from 80 to 99 % in Austria, Denmark, Germany, or the Netherlands.

The overall proportion of the population connected to urban waste water treatment ranged from 70 to 85 % (with the exception of Slovakia) in 2015. Over 70 % of the population in the Czech Republic and Estonia is connected to tertiary treatment, while Hungary, Lithuania and Poland reported a tertiary treatment connection rate of 59-65 %.

The percentage of the population connected to urban waste water treatment plants ranges from 48 to 87 %. In Bulgaria and Romania, about half of the treatment is tertiary

Where it is collected in the Western Balkans, urban waste water is mainly collected without treatment. The overall percentage of the population connected to urban waste water treatment plants ranges from 35 to 59 %.

Poland – for example – is seeing the benefit of investment in water infrastructure. Between 2004 and 2007, the European Commission allocated €12.9bn of community funds, which were combined with €4bn of Polish public and private funds, to improving the Polish water infrastructure. 376 new waste water treatment plants were built and 1.206 were extended or modernised in the 2003-2014 period. Over 76.000km of sewage networks were built, exceeding €14bn in investments.

Thanks to this investment, some Polish cities reduced their water use by 25% on average. In Warsaw alone, individual daily use was estimated at 450 litres in the 1990's. Today, this is less than 100 litres. This was achieved through leakage reduction, renewed and upgraded infrastructure, education and smart networks.

The investment also saw an increase in water quality, including bathing water. The coastal waters in the Baltic Sea improved due to the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, meaning that in 2016, 86.5% of all coastal bathing waters met at least sufficient water quality standards.

This could not be done without the European Investment Bank: In comparison with other international financing institutions, the EIB has been the largest source of loan financing to the global water sector to date. Between 2008 to 2012, EIB direct lending to water-related projects, including irrigation and sewerage, amounted to some EUR 17bn of which 89% was for schemes in the Member States of the European Union. A total of 136 major water supply, sanitation and flood protection projects were financed during this period.

More investment is needed to make urban waste water treatment plants fit to meet the difficult challenges posed by the impacts of climate change, as well as the presence of antibiotics and other micro-pollutants in waste water, according to a European Environment Agency (EEA) briefing published this year.

With strong policies and reliable partners, the EU remains the best and reliable partner for the Western Balkans and Serbia in terms of standards, value for money and financial support available.

Thank you

Statement of Portugal

Ms. Ana Albuquerque, Member of the Board of Directors, The Water and Waste Services Regulation Authority

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate and thank Serbia, UNECE, and WHO for the organization of this meeting.

I would also like to congratulate the Secretariat for the tremendous and impressive work that was developed in the last 3 years, namely for developing six very relevant publications to support the work done by our countries.

Portugal signed the Protocol in 1995 and implemented it the last 3 years. Although the country had a system of indicators related to water already in place for more than 10 years, the implementation of the Protocol was an opportunity to revise the indicators and above all to link the process with the SDGs implementation process.

But as I will have the opportunity to speak about this project later, I now want to share with you some thoughts about the importance of the Protocol and the need to give financial support to the Protocol.

We heard this morning several references to the investments that countries are doing and need to do in water and sanitation infrastructures and to the institutions that are financing those huge investments (namely EBRD, EIB, WB, ...)

As you may know, the countries that accede or ratify the Protocol have two years to set firm targets in areas covering the entire water cycle, as well as dates by which they will achieve such targets. The secretariat of the Protocol developed a fantastic tool to support countries from the operational point of view on target setting. This tool provides insights regarding target setting process and a framework to apply it.

During the process, the countries define targets, but also identify concrete measures to achieve them and the needs for investment.

The Secretariat and compliance committee support countries in the implementation of the targets and follow up on the assessment of progress through the mandatory reporting system.

We can say that the Protocol could be a valuable tool and help the organizations (like banks, or even the European commission) that support water related investments in order to identify and prioritize projects that are in line with their objectives and to help them in doing the review and assessment of progress on those targets.

On the other hand, to countries that need financial support to implement their water related strategies, the implementation of the Protocol could facilitate that process of obtaining the financial support they need, as it shows their commitment to the targets.

In conclusion, we can say that the Protocol is a win-win tool and I wish to challenge financial institutions and the European Commission to work side by side with the Protocol secretariat in order to support Member States in advancing their water and sanitation agenda.