

**Fourth EU - Central Asia High Level Conference: Platform for Environment and Water
Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic 13/14 February 2013
European Union Special Representative for Central Asia
Amb. Patricia Flor**

Excellencies, Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the European Union and HR/VP Ashton, it is a great honour for me to be among this distinguished circle today.

I am happy to see that Vice Minister Dassù from Italy and Mr. Constantin representing Romania made the long way from their capitals. I also welcome State Secretary Kovács from Hungary. This is a true sign of their personal and their countries' commitment to Europe's efforts in advancing dialogue and cooperation on environment and water issues with our Central Asian partners.

Vice Minister Dassù just invited to hold the Fifth EU-Central Asia High Level Conference 2015 in Milan, a proposal I fully support.

I am particularly grateful to our Kyrgyz hosts and would like to thank Vice Prime Minister Sarpashev for having us here. Kyrgyzstan is showing the traditional hospitality of Central Asia and we enjoy it very much.

And I am happy to see the Central Asian delegations - from Kazakhstan, lead by Minister Kapparov, the Tajik delegation with Deputy Chairman Radjabov of the Committee for Environmental Protection and the delegation from Uzbekistan with Deputy Minister for Agriculture and Water Management Khamraev.

A healthy and well preserved environment is the basis for all life on earth and water is life in itself. We all want to breathe fresh air, eat healthy food and drink fresh water. But for this, we have to do something – it does not come by its own. We need to see that economic growth

happens in a sustainable way, we need to "green" our economies and develop new technologies which are allowing this.

Above all, we have to think about consequences of our actions. To give you an example from my region: when engineers changed the riverbed of the Rhine and other rivers they wanted to do good, they wanted to improve the waterways for shipping, make rivers better navigable. Yet when we experienced the worst flooding ever of cities like Cologne, we suffered the unintended consequences of these engineering feats. That is why the EU has decreed that every major project must be checked through environmental impact assessment and feasibility studies. It is not to put obstacles in the way of those who pursue a project with good reasons; it is to ensure sustainability and to avoid harm to all people concerned.

The environment is the most transnational of transnational issues, and its security is an important dimension of peace, national security and human rights. Climate change brings with it additional challenges which will affect all regions, also especially Central Asia.

As world population grows, climate changes and the global need for energy increases we become more and more interdependent. In many cases, we will no longer be able to find solutions at the national level. It is true that it might sometimes be a challenge to find fair and acceptable transnational solutions, to define cooperation rules across borders when some are richer, some bigger, some endowed with natural resources and others not. But cooperation is not only very often indispensable; it is worth pursuing because it actually enlarges the pie. It is not zero sum, it can produce more for everyone. I remember that, in my childhood, there were no fish in the Rhine River; it was a dead river - polluted by chemical industries in Switzerland and Germany, by shipping down to the Netherlands, by sewage from big cities on its course. Today, fish are back thanks to transnational agreements on fighting pollution. And everyone living on this river benefits regardless of nationality.

In the coming two days we want to take stock – review what was done so far in the framework of the EU-Central Asia Strategy and its Platform for Environment and Water; we want to engage in a dialogue with you, exchange information and best practices. We are fortunate to have among us a lot of expertise from Central Asia, the EU Member States and EU institutions and I hope we can make good use of it.

It is for you to decide what mechanisms could work for Central Asia, but the EU has developed a couple of instruments which can serve – adapted to the individual needs of each of the Central Asian countries – as best available practice. I am speaking about rules and regulations like the Water Framework Directive and the European Water Initiative with its National Policy Dialogues. I am talking about EU Member States experience with international frameworks, of environmental information sharing systems and the EU experience on working towards a low carbon economy world wide. Furthermore, the UN Water Conventions provide a valuable framework for cooperation between state partners.

Of course, EU and Central Asia are not starting from zero; a lot of groundwork was done already. During this conference, we would like to agree with you on the way ahead – our joint priorities and work programme which was elaborated in the two working groups on water and environmental governance and climate change.

We will hear from colleagues and participants about concrete programmes and projects in the environmental sphere and we are looking forward to listening to your ideas on which paths we should continue to follow and where we should seek new ways of cooperation.

Central Asia is a region which links Europe to Asia and therefore you are important partners for us. The European Union is interested in helping to find mutually beneficial and sustainable solutions on issues that are vital for the Central Asian region. These solutions should be tailor-made for you, but they should also correspond to international standards.

The French writer Jean Giono once said:

"Life is water. If you cup your hand, you will keep it. If you tighten your fist, you will lose it."

I am looking forward to our exchange and a lively debate. I wish us all a fruitful conference.

Thank you for your attention.