

Regional Forum on Sustainable Development (March 29-30)

Statement on behalf of the EU and its Member States

29/03/2023 f

Co-chairs, Madam Executive Secretary

I would like to make this statement on behalf of the EU and its Member States.

This year's Regional Forum on Sustainable Development has a special importance. We are meeting **halfway through the implementation of the 2030 agenda**. This forum should send a powerful message from our region, a message of concern but also a message of hope, not only to the High-Level Political Forum in July but also to the SDG Summit in September.

I mentioned a message of concern because the **UNECE report on the SDGs in the region is indeed alarming**: it shows that the region is further away from fulfilling the 2030 Agenda than it was a year ago. Our efforts have been insufficient. The pandemic, growing inequalities, the climate and biodiversity crises and unabated environmental degradation have hindered progress. Last year all those challenges have been further exacerbated by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. However, despite the bleak situation in the region, I mentioned also a message of hope because crises may stimulate positive action and change. Success stories, science and high impact initiatives, which we will hear about today and tomorrow, tell us that we can turn the tide if we work together more actively and faster.

But let me be clear at the outset: **Peace and Security are a prerequisite for sustainable development.**

The EU and its Member States unreservedly condemn **Russia's illegal, unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine**, which blatantly violates international law as well as the principles of the UN Charter, and reiterate their solidarity with Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. We support the UN Secretary General's call on Russia to stop the war and we welcome the UN General Assembly Resolution on 'Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine', which was adopted with broad support from the international community. Russia's decision to bring war back to Europe imperils the very fulfilment of the SDGs in all their dimensions.

Besides human suffering, the Russian aggression, in particular Russian shelling of industrial and energy infrastructure, has devastating impacts on SDG 9 and 7 and is causing air, soil, and water pollution, and biodiversity loss, with serious consequences for SDG 6, as well as SDGs 14 and 15. The aggression has also undermined areas of cooperation within UNECE, such as environment, energy or transport infrastructure. Soaring food and energy prices, alongside other multiple impacts of the Russian aggression on Ukraine, have also put SDG implementation at global level at risk.

Despite those difficult circumstances, **we are ready redouble our efforts.**

The EU and its Member States are committed to the full and timely implementation of the 2030 Agenda. We have developed deeply transformative domestic policies, such as the European Green Deal, and positive contributions for the advancement of the multilateral agenda, including Team

Europe Initiatives, the Global Gateway strategy and the Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument.

As you may know, this year, the EU is conducting a Voluntary Review. It represents an opportunity to highlight the EU's commitment to the 2030 Agenda implementation, internally and externally.

In our view, **regional cooperation is essential to fulfil the 2030 Agenda. UNECE is a key forum** to undertake concrete regional action.

This is particularly so for the **SDGs under review this year**:

1. SDG6 (**Water**): Addressing water challenges is crucial for achieving progress on the 2030 Agenda. Water is a shared resource that requires **Transboundary Water Cooperation**, and **the UNECE Water convention** plays a key role in this regard. The EU fully supports its implementation and encourages enhanced accession, in particular by African partners. Water is also an important theme for cooperation with our Central Asian partners. After the historical UN 2023 Water Conference held in New York a few days ago, the road is clear: now comes implementation: we need to redouble our **UNECE cooperation to implement the results of UN 2023 Water Conference and its Water Action Agenda**.
2. SDG 11 (**Cities**): The implementation of the 2030 Agenda is a shared responsibility that requires a whole-of-society approach, through continuous and strong involvement of **all stakeholders**, including all regional and local authorities and cities. It is estimated that 65% of SDGs' targets cannot be reached without the coordination or involvement of local and regional governments. We welcome the innovative role of UNECE in encouraging the contribution of cities to international action for a safe, resilient and sustainable development, including **through the Forum of Mayors**. Cooperation on how best to meet the challenges of sustainable **urban planning**, including **tangible contributions on planning for the reconstruction of Kharkiv and Mykolaiv**, are fully in line with UNECE mandate, which historically had a strong role in reconstruction.
3. SDG 9 (**infrastructure, industrialisation, innovation**). Building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and fostering innovation holds the key for sustainable development. Through the Global Gateway initiative, the EU and its Member States aim to boost smart, clean and secure links in digital, energy, and transport sectors and to strengthen health, education and research systems across the world. With the Team Europe approach as the principal means of delivering, the initiative brings together the EU foreign policy and external relations priorities and the financial and development tools into a positive offer of investment into infrastructure and the associated norms, standards and regulatory frameworks. Here again let me congratulate the **UNECE for its innovative work on areas such as critical raw materials, circular economy, innovation, value chain traceability** amongst many others areas of cooperation, some of which the EU and its Member States are proud to support.
4. SDG 7 (**energy**): An accelerated, inclusive and just energy transition is the key solution ensuring energy security and universal access to safe, sustainable and affordable energy in the EU and our partner countries worldwide towards achieving climate neutrality. External energy engagement is an essential element of the "REPower EU" plan proposed by the Commission, responding to the energy crisis brought about largely by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Through our Climate and Energy Diplomacy, the EU and its Member States will continue to increase

cooperation and work closely with ambitious partners and organisations on the global just transition towards climate neutrality. In this regard, UNECE can play an important role in promoting cooperation on energy, enhancing energy efficiency and energy connectivity, in particular in Central Asia.

We are all aware of the urgency. There is no more room for complacency. The only solution is to **redouble our local, regional and global cooperation** and accelerate **mobilization of all sources of finance towards sustainable development**.