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Prague, 19 to 21 May 2008

Maritime and inland waterways co-operation in the OSCE area: Increasing security and protecting the environment

Plenary session IV — Emerging environmental threats to security: Need for enhanced maritime and inland waterways co-operation

Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, allow me to express my appreciation to the Finnish Chairmanship of the OSCE and to Mr. Bernard Snoy, the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities, for the invitation to participate in this Forum and the opportunity to share some thoughts on the environmental aspects of the use of transboundary rivers for transportation.

The Republic of Belarus is one of Europe's landlocked countries, and the rapidly growing economic needs of the State as well as the expansion of trade and freight transport make it necessary to develop multilateral links and seek new routes not only to neighbouring countries but also to those that can provide access to the sea.

It has to be recognized that water transport, just like any other form of transportation, also has a powerful impact on the ecological make-up of rivers. Environmentalists understand that water transport is undoubtedly becoming increasingly valuable from an economic point of view in the face of rising energy prices.

But the rapid development of river navigation in turn presents environmentalists with new and ever more challenging tasks.

Taking the Republic of Belarus as an example I should like to stress the need for co-ordination in the comprehensive work of the various departments and State authorites promoting inter-State links and for the development of a regulatory and legal framework for environmental protection and the use of river systems.

Practically all the basins of the five biggest rivers of Belarus are transboundary and belong to the basins of the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea. The nine biggest rivers exceed 500 km in length. The total length of navigable waterways exceeds 4,000 km.

Underground and surface waters are a key component of the natural environment of any country, they form the basis of living activity in all natural ecosystems and also serve as the most valuable resource for society and sustainable economic development.

The water resources in our country serve technical purposes and provide drinking water. The volume of water being withdrawn amounts to 800 million cubic metres and is used for commercial fisheries, recreation, irrigation and watering purposes, with hydropower potential estimated at 900,000 kW.

The Republic of Belarus is allocating substantial financial resources for the implementation of measures to achieve good quality surface water.

Research conducted in our country on surface water conditions indicates that industrial sewage, waste water from public utilities and agricultural waste are among the principal sources of pollution. The river transport infrastructure, on the other hand, does not pollute the water to any great extent.

Environmentally speaking, we consider the maintenance of good quality water, especially in transboundary basins to be a most important task and responsibility of every State.

This can be achieved by improving the elaboration of political documents (strategies) in the sphere of river transport development and environmental protection and by applying the basic provisions of international agreements such as the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment to the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context.

Improving national legislation both in the area of transboundary water resource management and the elaboration of a legal framework to regulate river navigation activity from the environmental standpoint is also an important part of the process. In particular, this involves the drafting of regulations, standards and norms and the environmental certification of facilities.

In analysing the regulatory and legal framework in Belarus, I wish to point out that extensive work in terms of the drafting of legislative acts and their harmonization with European legislation lies ahead of us, environmentalists and experts in the Ministry of Transport.

Since the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are party to the Helsinki Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, we are faced with the task of strengthening inter-State efforts to develop treaty relations on transboundary basins, with a view to improving regular observation (monitoring), the conduct of joint research and the exchange of current information. All this serves, in my opinion, to further strengthen good-neighbourly relations, to relieve possible

tension and to allow us to proceed with the drafting of new agreements, including ones on the joint use of navigable waterways.

Today, we are actively developing these types of agreements: for example, two agreements have been signed with Russia and Ukraine on the protection of transboundary waters; three new agreements are almost ready for signing (with Lithuania, Latvia and Russia on the rivers Neman/Nemunas, Western Dvina/Daugava and Dnieper respectively); an agreement on navigation has also been signed with Lithuania (and a further one is in preparation).

As for the elaboration of regional and national strategies, improvement of the regulatory and legal framework in the environmental context, development of inter-State links and the drafting of agreements, I believe that technical and advisory assistance by the OSCE would be most useful in the implementation of joint projects in the countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

There is, in my opinion, one more factor to be considered in assessing opportunities for using river systems for navigational purposes and that is early warning and identification of potential environmental threats when exploiting water arteries.

Such an assessment should take into account the specifically emerging natural and environmental component, and should also be made available to the public. The principle of precaution and “do no harm” should apply.

Natural phenomena and human activity are among the most unfavourable factors and threats to the development of river navigation in Belarus.

Natural phenomena may include icy conditions prevailing over many days, the fairly frequent recurrence of high water levels during springtime, floods, riverbank erosion, fluctuations in the fairway and low water levels in summertime.

In addition to these natural phenomena, there are human activities that pollute watercourses. Effluent and waste from river transportation and sewage from areas where ports are located add to the burden.

Environmental threats also include new challenges, such as climate change. The effects of climate change require more in-depth study on our part as well as the elaboration and planning of adaptive measures, notably in the development of river transport.

The transfer of experience and knowledge in this sphere could, in my opinion, serve as a theme for broad transboundary co-operation.

As environmentalists, we would welcome a broad platform to air problems in future water transport development and hope that this sector of the economy will become environmentally friendly and safe and that freight and passengers will be transported without any detriment to the environment.

I already mentioned that, along with their high ecological status, the transboundary rivers of Belarus are of important strategic significance for the development of national and international navigation.

At present, ten working river ports exist in the country within the system of river transport, and four watercourse companies have been set up to serve transport routes on eight rivers in Belarus. About 6 million US dollars will be spent on carrying out dredging work and fortifying riverbanks alone in 2008.

Vessels are being designed, built and restored in the Republic, technical conditions are being monitored, the certification of wares ensured, and safety in navigation conditions maintained at the required level.

All this makes the Republic of Belarus attractive for the development of international waterways with a view to expanding commercial transport, increasing the number of passengers as well as developing ecotourism.

Over the past few years the Belarusian section of the Augustów Canal, which is part of the historic common European waterway system, has been restored and a border control point opened, and we are looking forward to a significant growth in the flow of tourists from both Poland and Belarus as well as other countries on this waterway.

The Dnieper-Bug Canal, one of the most important sections of the Dnieper-Vistula-Oder waterway, is currently being renovated. Here work on the reconstruction of lock facilities (totalling 3 million US dollars) should be completed in 2008. Work was completed earlier on the construction of four sluice dams and two navigable locks which allow the passage of vessels 110 metres long and 12 metres wide with a draught of 2.2 metres.

The question of restoring the Dnieper-Vistula-Oder water transport connection was examined at the 49th session of the Working Group on Inland Water Transport of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. A decision was taken to establish a group of rapporteurs to prepare a feasibility study on this waterway restoration project.

We invite participating States and international organizations to join Belarus in its efforts to restore this most important inland waterway, which is classified as an E-40 European waterway.

In closing, I should like to express my gratitude to the Government of the Czech Republic for its hospitality and for making such a magnificent venue available for holding the 16th Meeting of the OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum.

Thank you for your attention.