

Draft statement by the Minister to the plenary

Addressing the participants ...

I would like to highlight the direct link between environmental problems and the field of human rights.

Access to safe water and wastewater disposal is also a fundamental human right according to the United Nations and has a direct impact on health, dignity and well-being of every individual. The human right to water is essential for eradicating poverty, building prosperous societies and ensuring that “no one is left behind” on the path to sustainable development. Although in 2010 the UN General Assembly “explicitly recognized the human right to water and sanitation and acknowledged that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential for the realization of all human rights” (Resolution A/RES/64/292), investments to date have proven insufficient to ensure universal access. Polluted water used by people is essentially a denial of a fundamental right.

Therefore, polluting water and impairing or preventing access to water should not only be considered an environmental crime, but should also be treated and punished as a crime against fundamental human rights. According to a 2016 UNEP and Interpol report, environmental crime is the fourth largest crime in the world, growing at 5% - 7% annually. Despite this, the number of investigations - including at European level - remains low overall compared to investigations in other crime areas. We are even witnessing crimes “live”, to mention one currently closest to us Central Europeans, and that is the Russian aggression on the territory of Ukraine and its consequences. Apart from the human losses, which are incalculable in monetary terms, the environmental damage that Russia has caused and continues to cause on the territory of another sovereign state has been estimated, on the basis of conservative estimates, at hundreds of billions of euros. However, these amounts do not take into account the damage to the health of the people who are forced to use contaminated water for drinking and cooking because they simply do not have any other water available. Because of the war, more than 6 million Ukrainians have limited or no access to clean water, and the health impact of contaminated water and exposure to toxins released by the conflict “can take years to manifest.” Repairing this damage will take a long time - perhaps a generation or two - whatever the outcome of this war, but even then, the aggressor will have to be held accountable for the damage they caused.

Unfortunately, the Slovak Republic also bears the legacy of environmentally irresponsible activities of industry and agriculture, which even today still threaten the quality of water and prevent its use for human consumption. There are still sites in Slovakia that act as a toxic ulcer and we simply do not have sufficient resources to remove all the contamination. In order not to create further threats, we have created legislative space to assert the superiority of public interest in water protection over any other interests. Therefore, in addition to efforts to ensure safe water, we also want to create legal and economic instruments to compensate those who are directly affected by these restrictions. At the same time, I would like to pay tribute to the Netherlands, with whom we signed a declaration of cooperation last week to eradicate the dangerous groundwater contamination that threatens the largest drinking water source in Central Europe. We welcome the cooperation of Slovak and Dutch experts, who will help finding the most appropriate way of remediating the environmental burden, caused by negligent decisions of the Government in the 1970s.

Another problem that the Slovak Republic carries from the past and has still not been able to deal with fully is providing access to drinking water and wastewater disposal in some marginalised communities. This long-standing social problem has no easy solution and we are fully aware of its context. Slovak Republic subscribes to the Europe-wide call to improve access to drinking water and sanitation for

marginalised groups. The EU Drinking Water Directive was adopted in 2021, and a revision of the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive is being worked on this year. By the end of 2027, EU Member States will have to identify categories of people with no or limited access to water and sanitation, assess ways to improve access to water and sanitation for these people and support the creation of freely and safely accessible sanitation facilities in public space. Without mainstreaming access to water for marginalised groups, it is not possible to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, not only for Goal 6 (water) but for all 17 SDGs.

As I said in the introduction, it is essential to ensure favourable conditions for health, dignity, and well-being of every individual. We need to involve multiple sectors of society while making maximum effort to cooperate with all departments concerned, because these are not only environmental problems, but also political and social ones.

Draft statement by the Minister

in an Interactive dialogue 3 Water for climate, resilience and environment: source to sea, biodiversity, climate, resilience and disaster risk reduction

For many millennia, humans have fought against nature in the name of successful development of society. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was said that two networks were necessary for economic development of any territory - electricity and road infrastructure. Since historically, landscapes were formed in favourable geographical and hydrological areas, water was accessible. In the process, however, humans have perpetrated many destructive actions - we have polluted rivers, drained wetlands, and devastated the landscape's water regime. Today, we face a global challenge - how to make the landscape more resilient to climate change. If we want to increase the country's resilience to climate change, we need to leave enough space for water in the country. Experience from around the world clearly shows us this.

To do this, we need to make a number of changes in our relationship with rivers and landscapes. These are not just technical measures; the central issue remains the readiness of governments to make changes in legislation and governance. For example: it is that above all, environmental requirements for space need to be integrated into spatial development planning. Of course, space must be left for rivers to spill over in times of flooding. This means not locating new developments close to rivers and thus not exposing them to the resulting risks. This would seem to be a given, but practice shows that it is not that obvious. One of the economic tools to guide land development is to translate the risk of flood risk to buildings into adjusting the insurance sector accordingly.

Incentives for landowners and land users in the landscape to maintain existing and create new landscape features that promote slowing stormwater runoff or reducing erosion are also a necessity. This applies particularly to agriculture and forestry. These examples show the need to move away from a fragmented approach to water conservation and use towards an integrated approach.

With the adoption of the National Water Policy Concept in 2022, Slovakia has in recent years embarked on a path of promoting river revitalisation, restoring the natural character of streams that have been modified or straightened in the past for various reasons. Nature has clearly shown us that the more our rivers are straightened and fortified with concrete, the more vulnerable our country is to the effects of climate change. Conversely, the more our rivers retain their natural or close to nature quality, the more resilient our landscapes will be. There is also an inevitable change at the governance level: the role of experts is no longer to explain the need for revitalisation measures, but more and more to support the practical decision-making process, where many actors and their interests collide.

We are convinced that the cost of giving the room back to water will be returned to us many times over in the form of safer lives for people in our communities, towns and cities.

Draft statement by the Minister

in Interactive Dialogue 4 Water for cooperation: transboundary and international water cooperation, cross-sectoral cooperation, including scientific cooperation, and water across the 2030 Agenda

Addressing the participants

Political and institutional fragmentation in water conservation and use poses significant challenges, often leading to conflicts between water resource users and impeding equitable access. We see that in almost all countries there are overlapping mandates between departments (water protection, nature conservation, land use, hydropower use). In addition, there are challenges in how to organize cooperation between countries. Slovakia, as a landlocked country, borders five countries sharing the largest international river basin, the Danube, with 14 countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, cooperation in international structures is essential for us and has a long tradition. Our experience shows that the importance of cooperation must be demonstrated not only by formal cooperation commissions, but above all by practical work and joint projects in these international commissions. An example is cooperation within the International Commission for Protection of Danube River (ICPDR), perhaps the largest scientific and practical project of the Joint Danube Survey, which is held in regular cycles since 2001. However, there are situations where it is not easy to find mutual agreement on a solution to the problem. This was also the case in relations between Slovakia and Hungary in the case of the Danube Waterworks System in the early 1990s. Despite the fact that we have not yet been able to conclusively settle the dispute that has arisen, we have open mutual communication with Hungary on this and we are gradually moving forward and are capable of working together to improve the situation. This is only possible because we respect peaceful coexistence, mutual respect and equality as basic principles of international cooperation.

Another example of cooperation between countries is the activities of the expert groups under the auspices of UNECE in the framework of the implementation of the International Water Convention (Helsinki Convention). This is an opportunity for more than 40 countries to work together on water conservation and use issues. Slovakia welcomed the fact that the Water Convention, which was originally a convention of cooperation between the countries of the European and Central Asian area, has been opened for signature to all UN countries. Slovakia, as an EU Member State, had also joined the Transboundary Water Cooperation Coalition. We also support the focus on research and innovation and the development and sharing of data, information and knowledge at all levels in order to implement transboundary water cooperation.

At regional, transboundary, national and local levels, it is important to improve cross-sectoral cooperation through integrated water resources management (IWRM). At the global level, we should strengthen the dialogue on water within the United Nations, and we therefore welcome the creation of a UN Special Envoy on Water. The UN Special Envoy on Water should also contribute to strengthening synergies between sectors and raise the visibility of water in all relevant UN processes. To this end, the Special Envoy should work closely with UN-Water with the aim of facilitating this system-wide approach to water.