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Report on the Inaugural Meeting of the Supervisory Board of the Erasmus+ HWCA Project

Corvinus University, Budapest, 29 September, 2023

The inaugural meeting of the Supervisory Board of the Erasmus+ HWCA project was attended by Professor Danilo Turk, Chairman of the Global High-Level Panel on Water and Peace, former President of Slovenia, and former Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations (Chairperson of the Board), Professor Mark Zeitoun, Director General of the Geneva Water Hub and Professor of Water Diplomacy at the Geneva Institute of Graduate Studies, Professor Christine Bichsel of the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, Ambassador Terhi Hakala, the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Professor Chinara Adamkulova, former project manager, Felix Schafer, Political Adviser to the EUSR, Dr. Miklós Rosta, Executive Director of the Center for Central Asia Research of Corvinus University, Budapest and Marton Krasznai, Project Coordinator.

The Project Coordinator outlined the main objectives and work plan of the project. He emphasized that Central Asian countries needed a new generation of highly trained experts on water governance and water diplomacy to cope with increasing challenges faced by the water sector. The crumbling water infrastructure of the region is unable to cope with the effects of climate change combined with growing demand for water due to economic development, demographic growth and increased water use by neighboring countries as a result of expansion of irrigated areas. Shortages or breakdowns in communal water supply or irrigated agriculture may aggravate economic and social problems. Profound changes in water governance are needed to achieve economic and financial sustainability of the sector. Coordinated efforts by highly trained experts in water governance and water diplomacy would help prevent internal problems caused by water shortages igniting regional tensions.

Three needs assessment teams of experts of EU universities will visit 12 Central Asian universities in October and November. They will get acquainted with the curriculum and the capacity of teaching staff, including English language proficiency of teaching staff and students. Work on updating existing curricula or development of new curricula will be planned on the basis of the outcomes of needs assessment missions. Two week training courses on water governance and water diplomacy for teaching staff will be organized in the summer of 2024 at IHE Delft and Corvinus University Budapest.

The former Project Manager shared with the Board detailed financial data and described the structure for administrative support to project implementation at DA MFA KR, including quality control, dissemination and maintenance of the website. She also presented the outline of an MA course on water diplomacy.

Ambassador Hakala set the scene for the discussion on project implementation by an overview of recent political and economic developments in Central Asia. The countries of the region had to cope with negative spill-over of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and the war in the Ukraine. EU support helped the countries of the region to increase their resilience, preserve prosperity and strengthen their sovereignty. The summit meeting of Germany and the five Central Asian countries in Berlin and the 5 + 27 ministerial meeting planned in about a month contribute to the strengthening of trade and transport cooperation and political ties between the European Union and Central Asia. Transboundary water issues are among the greatest challenges faced by the region. The European Union supports dialogue and cooperation on water among the countries of Central Asia. The building of the Qosh Tepa canal in Afghanistan threatens with a dramatic increase of water shortages in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Strengthening human capacity is an important precondition of finding sustainable solutions to the problems of the water sector. The HWCA project can be turned into a long-term process of strengthening water cooperation. The EU works closely with IFAS. It is funding projects on water, energy and climate change adaptation, as well as strengthened cooperation between the governments, the private sector and civil society. To improve data collection and analysis, the EU is providing satellite land stations to all Central Asian countries. The EU works with other players interested in further developing transport corridors (the "middle-corridor" through Central Asia, including China and Türkiye).

After the introductory statements, the Supervisory Board began its discussion of the items on its agenda: the development of curricula on water governance and water diplomacy for Central Asian partner universities. Participants agreed that an effective basic package on water governance and water diplomacy should be developed, allowing for a phased introduction of the modernized or new curricula, offering a choice for each university. Clustering subjects into basic modules would provide the opportunity to choose themes and majors. Implementation of the project will have a transformative effect on the thinking of the academic community of the region. The integration of social sciences into programmes for engineering (e.g. for students of hydrology, irrigation, communal water supply, etc.) started at western universities many years ago. It has helped to change engineering concepts by taking into account the needs of the society and the protection of the natural environment. The HWCA project should aim at turning engineers around rather than training purely water governance experts. There is a need to profoundly change the thinking of decision makers and experts in charge of the water sector. Information and data should be freely available to all interested stakeholders in order to support decision making. Students should be taught and encouraged to examine problems with an open mind and not to be afraid to present initiatives, propose out of the box solutions.

The project should seek cooperation with several actors, like IFAS, UNRCCA and other regional organizations, as well as development agencies and international experts. Cooperation with different institutions could help define how best to combine various disciplines. It is important to make the curricula attractive and interesting for students by introducing stories about water cooperation in various parts of the world.

International water law - the 1992 and 1997 Conventions - is in many respects lagging behind impressive recent progress in the theory and practice of water cooperation, like fleshing out and implementing the concept of benefit sharing or IWRM in transboundary river basins. The updating of existing, or development of new curricula in close cooperation with Central Asian and international experts in international water law would offer an opportunity to awaken students' interest in the inevitable reform of water law and to present challenges and possible directions of its future development.

The theory and skills of water diplomacy are in the process of evolution and formation. New curricula on water diplomacy should be developed by collecting and analyzing experiences. Students of water diplomacy should learn how to reduce potential tensions among the countries of the region due to emerging water shortages and how to negotiate agreements on economic cooperation, like a smart regional investment concept. Water diplomacy could effectively contribute to the economic development of the countries of the region. Building a stable and secure institutional and legal framework for regional cooperation - including completion of the IFAS reform process - is a sine qua non precondition of investment in regional water infrastructure with a long break even period.

The basic theory and skills of water diplomacy should also be taught to students of water resources management. Students of water engineering should learn about the social and economic benefits of regional cooperation on water. Engineers understand better than anybody else that uncoordinated investment in and operation and maintenance of dams and other water infrastructure of regional importance is irrational and leads to significant losses. They need to learn how to coordinate with partners in transboundary river basins.

The HWCA project has a chance to generate change within the system of water governance. If a new generation of experts in water governance and water diplomacy is to have a chance of influencing policy making, students need to be properly mentored and have an opportunity for internships at important stakeholders of the water sector. This should be a two-way street: graduates of partner universities should bring with them important skills like analysis of statistical data, problem solving and initiative. Teaching methods should be developed accordingly, with emphasis on interactive teaching, analysis of case studies and other forms of teaching that can help develop social sciences skills.

Summer courses for students from all 12 partner universities, with negotiation simulations, could be organized with support of key practitioners, like ministries of foreign affairs, IFAS or international development partners and outstanding Central Asian and international experts. Exchanges of teaching staff and students with EU partner universities should be encouraged and supported, too.

The Supervisory Board will meet online once every quarter, or as necessary. The next face to face meeting is planned in early autumn of 2024 in Geneva. It will assess the results of the two-week training courses at IHE Delft and Corvinus University Budapest and the initial results achieved in the development of teaching materials.