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***Immediate Release***

**24.04.2020**

**PRESS RELEASE:**

**Political Cooperation Across Borders Protects Water Resources In Drin Basin**

**Ministers and High-level representatives of the five Riparians endorse the Strategic Action Programme (SAP) for the Drin River Basin in South East Europe.**

High level representatives from the five Riparians virtually signed a joint statement today, thus endorsing the **Strategic Action Programme (SAP)** for the sustainable management of the Extended Drin Basin, directly benefiting its 1.6 million inhabitants. Shared among Albania, Greece, Kosovo\*, Montenegro and North Macedonia (the five ‘Riparians’), the Drin River Basin provides water resources for drinking, energy, fishing and agriculture, biodiversity, tourism and industry.

This endorsement confirms the political will among the five Riparians to work across borders and sends a strong message that improved water resources management, which also yields benefits for public health and livelihoods, remains a priority and will continue to be pursued at the transboundary level, in spite of current difficulties associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The current crisis underscores the vital importance of water for hygiene in the region and globally.

The development of the SAP, which comprises **over 100 agreed policy and technical actions,** has been supported by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) [Drin Project](http://drincorda.iwlearn.org/), which was designed to realize the Memorandum of Understanding for the sustainable management of the Drin Basin (Drin MoU), signed in Tirana on 25 November 2011 by the responsible Ministries of the Drin Riparians. The Drin Core Group (DCG), a joint body established through the Drin MoU to coordinate its implementation, and its Expert Working Groups, are fully operational, with women representing 30% and 60% of the members respectively. The Drin Project is implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and executed by the Global Water Partnership – Mediterranean (GWP-Med). United Nations Economic Commission (UNECE) is a partner in this process.

Today’s signing is a step forward in implementing the Shared Vision of the sustainable management of the Drin Basin, set through the Drin MoU.

The SAP was developed during the last year through an extensive consultation with over 200 stakeholders, including relevant Ministry representatives and technical experts. It sets out actions to address four transboundary issues that cause a number of negative effects to nature, society and the economy i.e. water pollution, biodiversity degradation, water and sediment flow disturbance, marking the first strategic document for shared water resources in the region. These transboundary issues were identified through an extensive scientific assessment of the Drin Basin, known as a Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis (TDA). The actions included in the SAP will also assist the Riparians in implementing water and environment related European Union (EU) Directives, such as the EU Water Framework Directive.

The SAP will provide the main reference point to inform the coordinated management of the Drin Basin for years to come. The priority for the Riparians now is to identify sources of funding to implement the SAP, to ensure the sustainable management of the Drin Basin can be realized.

***Statements from the signatories:***

**H.E. Mr Jani Makraduli,** Deputy Minister of Environment and Physical Planning, North Macedonia:

*One of the lessons learned from COVID-19 pandemic is that it is important to have good cross-border and regional cooperation. The SAP plays two different roles: environmental, as an important step towards future joint management of the Drin Basin, and an important political message for regional cooperation. I would like to greet the support of the implementing agencies of the Drin Process and donor partners (GEF, UNDP, UNECE, GWP-Med). I strongly believe the SAP can contribute towards supporting the planned donor conference and it will further continue with the follow up of the implementation of the projects from the SAP.*

**Professor Konstantinos Aravossis**, General Secretary, Natural Environment and Water, Ministry of Environment and Energy, Greece:

*With this Joint Declaration, the competent authorities of the Drin Riparians, appreciating the positive results of the actions undertaken so far, reaffirm the political will to continue cooperating towards the sustainable management of the Extended Drin River basin, in line with the principles and legal framework of the European Union and other bilateral and multilateral agreements concerning the region's sub-basins.*

*At the same time, they reaffirm their willingness to step up efforts to incorporate international conventions and protocols adopted by the parties and recognize environmental protection and conservation, as well as the sustainable management of water resources, as an integral part of the overall development of the region, through coordinated actions to address the problems identified.*

**Mr Izedin Bytyqi**, Secretary General, Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment, Kosovo:

*The adoption of SAP, for us represents a very important step forward, towards strengthening the joint management of shared water resources. The work done so far… serves as a strong foundation… to determine the common goals and objectives,… to further strengthen our cooperation, and to implement concrete activities to improve the water quality, reducing water stress, and reducing human impact in line with Integrated Water Resources Management and Water Framework Directive Principles. I also thank my colleagues from Albania, Greece, North Macedonia, and Montenegro for their cooperation. Looking forward to the next step, that is SAP implementation!*

 **Ms Gerta Lubonja**, General Director, Agency for Water Resources Management, Albania:

*At a time the world is locked down to defeat the coronavirus pandemic, it has never been more important to protect our water resources. In these unprecedented times, water is an indispensable weapon in fighting the disease, acting as a barrier to the virus and maintaining a decent standard of living for the millions of people who are confined to their homes. Because we have been working for more than 10 years now, with the conviction that we are managing an extraordinary shared resource, we will manage to remain focused in the implementation of Drini SAP and, despite everything, optimistic in these particularly difficult times.*

**Mr. Momčilo Blagojević,** General Director of Directorate for Water Management, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Montenegro

This is a very significant event for strengthening regional cooperation within the Drin Basin and it is our extreme pleasure to promote joint action for the coordinated management of the shared water resources in the Drin Basin. This joint statement will definitely frame future co-operation in years to come and we will continue to work with strong devotion in order to ensure the protection of the environment and better management of our water resources.

***Statements from the Drin Project Partners:***

**Mr Gustavo Fonseca**, Director of Programs, Global Environment Facility:

*The signing of the Strategic Action Programme for the extended Drin River basin marks an important step towards greater cooperation across borders and within the shared environmental resources that is embodied in a healthy, resilient Drin river ecosystem. It is heartening to witness the strong cooperation between economic sectors, political leaders, and those living in the basin across multiple countries, captured in the Strategic Action Programme. Shared river basins across the world stand to learn a lot from the spirit of cooperation and collaboration that the Drin River Basin is showcasing today.*

**Mr Limya Eltayeb**, UNDP Resident Representative in Albania:

*The endorsement of the Strategic Action Program - following a decade of work after the signing of the transboundary Memorandum of Understanding in Tirana in 2011, is an important step forward in setting out priority issues in the Drin Basin and how they can be addressed. This strategic document represents a shared vision at the benefit of 1, 6* million *inhabitants and for sustainable development.*

**Dr. Monika Weber-Fahr**, Executive Secretary, Global Water Partnership:

*In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, the 5 Drin riparians are sending a strong message that improved and integrated water resources management will continue to be vigorously pursued, yielding benefits for livelihoods, economic growth and jobs, environment, health, and more. Servicing the Drin collaboration process for nearly a decade, GWP and GWP-Med can only feel proud of this achievement; we are thankful to our partners, the GEF, UNDP and UNECE, for their continuous support and joint action that has produced tangible results to the benefit of the Drin riparians.*

**Mr Marco Keiner**, Director of Environment Division, UNECE:

*Transboundary cooperation in the Extended Drin River Basin has reached major milestones and brought important benefits, contributing to the implementation of the UNECE Water Convention by the Riparians.  This cooperation importantly also supports the achievement of SDGs notably SDG target 6.5 on integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation.*

*\*All references to Kosovo are made in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999)*

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**About Global Environment Facility (GEF)**

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) was established on the eve of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit to help tackle our planet’s most pressing environmental problems. Since then, the GEF has provided close to $20 billion in grants and mobilized an additional $107 billion in co-financing for more than 4,700 projects in 170 countries. Through its Small Grants Programme, the GEF has provided support to nearly 24,000 civil society and community initiatives in 128 countries.

**About United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)**

UNDP works in about 170 countries and territories, helping to achieve the eradication of poverty, and the reduction of inequalities and exclusion. The UNDP help countries to develop policies, leadership skills, partnering abilities, institutional capabilities and build resilience in order to sustain development results.

**About Global Water Partnership – Mediterranean (GWP-Med)**

Global Water Partnership – Mediterranean (GWP-Med) was established in 2002 as the Mediterranean branch of the inter-governmental organization, Global Water Partnership (GWP). Aiming for a water-secure Mediterranean, GWP-Med is a multi-stakeholder action network that works at a regional, transboundary, national, basin and local level, where it promotes action and facilitates dialogue on [Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM)](https://www.gwp.org/en/About/why/the-need-for-an-integrated-approach/), provides technical support to policy making, implements demonstration activities and contributes to skills and knowledge development. Strategic priorities include leveraging the SDG target 6.5 on IWRM, adaptation to climate vulnerability and change and river basin/transboundary water management. Gender and youth issues, as well as private sector participation in water financing are also key, cross-cutting issues for GWP-Med.

*For further information, please contact Global Water Partnership – Mediterranean Communications Officer, Ms Frances Dixon at* *frances@gwpmed.org*

**About UNECE and the Water Convention**

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), set up in 1947, is one of the 5 regional commissions of the United Nations. It supports countries in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, the secretariat of which is provided by UNECE, has, since its entry into force in 1996, provided an important framework for improving the management of transboundary surface water and groundwater resources, initially in the pan-European region and since its global opening in 2016 to all UN Member States for accession, worldwide. The Convention aims to protect and ensure the qualitative, quantitative and sustainable management of transboundary water resources by facilitating and promoting cooperation between countries. The Convention’s institutional framework, which is based on the Meeting of the Parties, its subsidiary bodies, as well as a permanent secretariat, assists Parties in the implementation and progressive development of the Convention. This development includes the exchange of experiences and good practices, the development of guidelines and recommendations, field projects and capacity-building.