



Permanent Mission
of the Czech Republic to the United Nations,
OSCE and other International Organizations
in Vienna

Penzingerstrasse 11-13
A-1140 Vienna
tel.: +431 899 58 140, fax: +431 894 57 98
email: vienna.mission@mzv.gov.cz
www.mzv.cz/mission.vienna

Concluding Meeting of the 31st OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum

*“Enhancing security and stability in the OSCE region
through digital innovation, contributing to sustainable development
and climate adaptation”*

Prague, 12 - 13 September 2024

**Welcome speech by H.E. Mr. Jan Lipavský
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic**

Madam Chairperson (Permanent Representative of Malta to the OSCE),
Mister Permanent Secretary,
Madam Director,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to the Czernin Palace, the seat of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.

I am especially delighted to welcome among us Mr. Christopher Cutajar, Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Malta, and Ms. Catherine Fearon, Director of the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre as acting Head of the OSCE Secretariat.

For more than thirty years, every September, we have been hosting the concluding meeting of the OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum in this historical building. I am glad that the Forum is reconvening today, after we were forced to content ourselves with a provisional format last year.

In this respect, I would like to thank the Maltese Chairpersonship-in-Office for its leadership and enormous efforts to achieve consensus on this issue. I wish to emphasize that the OSCE's regular meetings should take place as they have been mandated. It must be the rule, not the exception.

I would usually welcome on this occasion also the OSCE Secretary-General. Unfortunately, this position is currently vacant. I take this opportunity to urge the participating States to act responsibly and select the new OSCE's leadership without further delay. I wish to point out that the Maltese Chairpersonship-in-Office has been guiding us skilfully through this process which, as I hope, will soon result in the appointment of a new Secretary-General and Heads of the three Autonomous Institutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is the third time that we are meeting here in Prague while a brutal war is raging in Ukraine. Russia's continued war of aggression forces us to refrain from the business as usual and to focus rather on the consequences of the war and the support the OSCE can provide to Ukraine. Ukraine must remain on the top of the OSCE's agenda.

I particularly condemn the wave of Russia's concentrated attacks on civilian infrastructure that we have been witnessing for several months now. I wish to emphasize that the attacks on civilian infrastructure and indiscriminate attacks are prohibited under international law and may constitute a war crime.

Czechia is one of the founding members of the Register of Damage for Ukraine, that serves as a record of evidence and information on claims for damage, loss or injury caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The subsequent step of establishment of the Claims Commission to review claims should follow. I want to underline the importance of investigating Russia's war crimes in Ukraine, violations of international humanitarian law and other crimes committed on the territory of Ukraine, including the crime of aggression. Perpetrators must be brought to justice in accordance with international law.

Russia's illegal, unprovoked, and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine has had severe geopolitical, economic, environmental, and social consequences that go well beyond its borders. Both Ukraine and Russia are two major suppliers of energy, food, and fertilizers. The war has thus had a profound impact on global food security, causing disruptions in supply chains and raising prices for these commodities. This aggravates food shortages and inflation in many countries, particularly the most vulnerable.

The destruction of the Nova Kakhovka Dam has posed further risks of a long-term environmental catastrophe. We firmly condemn the use of water as a weapon of war. Destroying water infrastructures, polluting water, or diverting watercourses to limit or prevent access to water constitute violations of international human rights and humanitarian laws.

In response to this disaster, Czechia supports the United Nations Environment Programme's project aimed at analyzing the sediments of the Kakhovka Reservoir. This project is crucial for assessing the environmental impacts of the dam's destruction, particularly regarding health risks for agriculture in the de-watered areas. The data collected will inform recovery plans and help mitigate long-term environmental damage, not only within Ukraine but potentially in surrounding regions as well.

Water is a strategic natural resource and an essential element of national and regional security. Ensuring sustainable access to safe drinking water and sanitation, achieving sustainable water management, and preventing scarcity and reducing flooding events are key global challenges. We greatly value the OSCE's successful work on various aspects of water management, such as water diplomacy, transboundary water co-operation and good water governance. We look forward to the upcoming OSCE Economic and Environmental Dimension Implementation Meeting that should take stock of the implementation of the OSCE commitments in the field of water management.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has also resulted in the energy crisis in Europe. We are deeply concerned about the far-reaching consequences of Russia's seizure and constant violations of safety protocols of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. The consequences may extend beyond Ukraine's borders. We appreciate that energy security is an important part of the OSCE's comprehensive approach to security. Access to energy is not only crucial in supporting the provision of basic needs, but it is - first and foremost, a precondition to economic growth, political stability and prosperity.

We appreciate the OSCE's commitment to address and alleviate the economic and environmental consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. For example, the extra-budgetary project aimed at assessing the environmental impacts of the war and the options for their remedy brings important insights. In this context, we also highly value the efforts of the Office of the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities.

Yet, the impacts of the war will last for decades, hampering thus international efforts to tackle great economic and environmental challenges.

I can assure you that Czechia is determined to continue providing a long-term support to Ukraine to address the economic and environmental challenges caused by Russia's war of aggression. In this context, I wish to mention the Stabilization and Reconstruction Programme for Ukraine, initiated by the Government of the Czech Republic, with the yearly budget of about 20 million EUR. We have also been continuously contributing to the OSCE Support Programme for Ukraine and will do so also in the future. In the same vein, we continue to support the work of the Special Representative of the Chairperson-in-Office for Ukraine.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Digital technologies have advanced more rapidly than any other innovation in the history of humankind. They have impact on all aspects of our everyday life and are undoubtedly a main driver of socioeconomic growth, sustainability and prosperity.

However, digital transformation does not only lead to progress and prosperity, but also to the emergence of security threats and challenges, affecting for example critical infrastructure and the fulfilment of human rights. In this context, we appreciate the OSCE's work on supporting participating States to address the opportunities and challenges of digital transformation, enhancing thus security and stability in the region, and promoting regional and international co-operation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

No one can deny that climate change is a threat to humankind. Its impacts are being felt all around the world, including in the OSCE region. Extreme weather events are becoming more frequent, more severe and widespread, affecting lives of millions of people. In recent years, we have seen a rise in heat waves, which will likely continue with increasing global warming. The combination of droughts and heat waves results in extreme wildfires we have seen quite recently in our region. These phenomena are projected to worsen over time with climate change. On the other hand, more severe and frequent floods can pose a great threat to the lives and livelihoods.

The OSCE plays an important role in strengthening resilience to natural disasters. Disaster risk reduction can provide an opportunity to foster co-operation and build confidence and trust within societies as well as across borders.

Czechia stands in solidarity with the most vulnerable partner countries all around the world to improve disaster preparedness, early warning, and climate resilience. Through our bilateral and multilateral development assistance, we implement a wide range of climate adaptation-related projects to help partner countries, including in the OSCE region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Climate change is also a threat multiplier with the potential to deepen conflict and instability. A comprehensive approach to security allows the OSCE to address a wide range of interlinked security-related issues, including the impacts of climate change on peace and security. We appreciate the OSCE's work aimed at assessing potential security risks stemming from climate change, identifying and mapping vulnerable geographical areas, and developing transboundary adaptation measures for shared ecosystems.

Czechia further continues providing contributions to the extra-budgetary project focused on strengthening responses to climate-security risks in South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has reminded us how very alive this topic is in the OSCE regional context and how important it is for its participating States to address it. I wish to remind that the impacts of the war have a direct influence on global greenhouse gas emissions, both domestically and internationally, as well as on Ukraine's ongoing efforts to decarbonize its economy and adapt to a changing climate. However, funds and human and other resources that could have been used to address environmental issues, including climate change, had to be re-directed to respond to the consequences of war.

In this context, we thank the Maltese Chairpersonship-in-Office for organizing the OSCE High-Level Conference on Climate Change in June, acknowledging the importance of this topic in the OSCE context.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The OSCE is going through very challenging times, making it difficult for the organization to fulfil its mandate. I wish to encourage you to continue promoting and protecting the OSCE's core values and principles. We must bear in mind that thanks to its geographic scale and with its comprehensive security concept, the OSCE is in a unique position to address many economic and environmental challenges we are facing today.

This is why this Forum is still relevant. In these turbulent times, it is particularly important that we support effective dialogue among participating States on the most pressing issues concerning our common security. We are proud to host these discussions in Prague.

Thank you for your attention.