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Statement by
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Mr. President,

Distinguished Members of the Executive Board,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to address you today in my new role as UNFPA Regional Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Following the more detailed presentation at the informal session, it is my pleasure to now present highlights of developments in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region, including the draft Country Programme for Albania for 2017-2021.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Government of Albania for their substantive leadership on the ICPD agenda that has already led to significant results.

Albania is part of the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region – a diverse region that includes middle-income countries with very different economic, social and cultural settings, but whose countries nevertheless share an aspiration towards greater progress for the future.

The progress towards sustainable development is profoundly connected to population dynamics. Many of the countries in the region face the unprecedented challenge of very low fertility rates. Four important factors – population decline, intensive migration, the shrinking of the working-age population and population ageing – will have an effect in many countries of the region.

At the same time, relatively high fertility prevails in some countries in the region, and several have a large proportion of young people. Countries like Albania, with 46% of its population under the age of 29, are still facing a window of economic opportunity and can take full advantage of the demographic dividend if effective policies are
implemented to ensure access to health services, quality education and effective participation of young people in the economy and society as a whole.

The region’s unique population dynamics are both an opportunity and a challenge for its development.

The countries of the region, including Albania, have made significant progress in almost every aspect of the ICPD mandate. For example, maternal mortality has been more than halved since the early 1990s. Countries have adopted laws and policies to promote human rights, gender equality and women’s empowerment, to facilitate family/work balance, to increase access to, and the quality of, sexual and reproductive health services (including for adolescents and young people), and promoting healthy and productive aging, to name a few.

Although the picture is positive overall, this is only part of the reality, because progress has been uneven. For example, some 17 million women across the region have an unmet need for contraception or are using high-failure traditional methods that put them at increased risk of unintended pregnancy or STIs. Usage rates of modern methods are alarmingly low; in seven countries they are even below 34%, the average of the world’s least developed countries. This has far-reaching implications. It contributes to some of the world’s highest secondary infertility rates. A staggering 12.6 million women in the region cannot get pregnant again even though they already gave birth. The region also witnesses the world’s fastest growing HIV epidemic, with sexual transmission quickly becoming the most predominant. In addition, in many countries, including Albania, disparities and inequalities in access to SRH services persist, particularly affecting ethnic minorities and rural populations. The virtual absence of quality comprehensive sexuality education in many countries negatively affects the lives of young people, rendering them vulnerable to early pregnancy, STIs and abuse. Gender inequalities and discrimination also continue across the region, manifested in
high rates of gender-based violence and harmful practices such as pre-natal gender-biased sex selection and early marriage.

Finally, achievements are at risk of being reversed due to the impact of continued financial and economic uncertainty, rising inequalities, high unemployment – particularly among youth – large population movements, and political instability, all compounded by declining donor assistance and dwindling resources for health care reform.

Within this context, the role of UNFPA in the region is critical. We are working with governments and civil society to advance the ICPD agenda by building on every opportunity to invest in human capital and reduce inequalities. We make the linkages between the needs of young people, access to SRH, gender equality and poverty reduction and translate them into evidence-based policies, helping governments address population issues in the context of human rights rather than human numbers.

In doing this, UNFPA is committed to make transformational changes to be ‘fit for purpose’ and achieve greater impact. As part of the “Delivering as One” Programme of Action, UNFPA in Albania supports the Government to fully address the reproductive rights and needs of young people and gender inequalities, especially in terms of supporting national implementation of legislation, policies, and programmes, focusing on the most vulnerable and marginalised.

The adoption of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development sets a new path and course of action in the region. It reaffirms the vision of the Cairo Programme of Action – that development means the expansion of multiple, reinforcing opportunities for a person across their life course – requiring simultaneous and integrated investments from many sectors.
UNFPA, as part of the UN Country teams, is supporting governments in the region to establish long-term visions, map existing national plans against the SDGs, and establish dedicated co-ordination bodies, with a focus on integrating the ICPD agenda with the SDGs.

Disaggregated data is vital for effective policy-making. UNFPA Country Offices are collaborating with National Statistical Offices in mapping data availability on SDG indicators and identifying gaps in national statistical systems, bringing together experts from national statistical offices and other stakeholders to discuss SDG mainstreaming and building monitoring systems.

In addition, at regional level, as part of a strong Regional UN Development Group and Regional Coordination Mechanism, UNFPA is playing an active role by co-leading the Regional Gender Working Group with UN Women, and the issue-based Coalition on Youth with UNICEF, to help countries accelerate SDG implementation related to gender equality and young people.

To increase its effectiveness and accountability, UNFPA, as part of UN Results-Based Monitoring working group, is working to strengthen national results-based monitoring systems under UN programmes, developing a set of standardised indicators, collecting regular data and using it for programme and management decision-making. In Albania, results-based monitoring is reinforced through the Country Programme’s Results and Resource Framework, developed jointly with the Government, with the strong commitment to deliver results during the programme timeframe.

Emphasizing the importance of building capacities for the evaluation of development activities at country level, UNFPA has created a human resource pool in all programme countries through institutional training on evaluation, linking the experts
with the global evaluation networks, and involving them to co-manage and oversee country-level evaluations.

The Regional Office is also working closely with OAIS in the piloting of a continuous auditing process to ensure effective financial management and risk mitigation.

The number of people affected by complex humanitarian crises in the region has increased dramatically over the last few years and UNFPA has stepped up its humanitarian action in response. The conflicts in the region and in neighbouring countries have forced large numbers of people to flee within or to the region, and their plight calls for urgent action to provide protection and SRH services for women and girls. UNFPA is working with national and international partners to enhance capacity in the areas of SRH and gender-based violence to address needs of the most vulnerable.

Bearing in mind the middle-income-country context, mobilizing resources for the ICPD agenda in the region has been significantly accelerated, strategically geared towards leveraging resources from governments themselves, development partners and the private sector. In this regard, I want to acknowledge the crucial role of our international partners and bilateral and multilateral donors who make our work for the people in these middle-income countries possible.

Mr. President, Distinguished Members of the Board

With a strong commitment to nationalizing the SDGs and implementing the ICPD beyond 2014, the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region is poised to achieve breakthroughs in reducing inequalities and making universal access to sexual and reproductive health a reality. UNFPA is committed to support this process.

I thank you for your attention.