Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Blue Peace Index was presented last February to participants of the second webinar of the Programme “Water as a driver of sustainable recovery: economic, institutional and strategic aspects of water resources management in Central Asia”. Many of you might have been intrigued by the fact that among the seven river basins covered by the study, the Syr Darya, Amu Darya and Tigris-Euphrates scored the lowest in the Index. Still, there is a huge difference between the economic development, social stability, and security of the riparians of the first two rivers - the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya - and the third river - the Tigris-Euphrates. I and fellow students at Corvinus University wanted to know if cooperation, or the lack of cooperation on water played a role in the very different economic, political and security development in these three river basins.

Even at first glance it was obvious: while there was a difference between these river basins in all five aspects analysed by the Index, one in particular, the cooperation context score revealed a significant difference. Our hypothesis was based on the observation that cooperation on water plays a much greater role in economic development and stability than it was previously thought. According to the hypothesis, if most of the circumstances are similar, then cooperation plays a key role in efficient and rational management of water resources, which then supports the socio-economic development of riparian countries. Central Asia, which does better than the riparians of the Tigris-Euphrates in water resource management, has a record of thirty years of rapid economic growth, social stability, and regional security.

There are many geographic, climatic, and historic similarities between the two regions: arid climate, the important role of irrigated agriculture, extreme exposure to climate change and ecological damage caused by short sighted policies. Both regions have colonial periods in their history and economic slumps - in the case of Central Asia a couple of difficult years at the beginning of the transition period after these countries gained independence in 1991.

Despite many similarities, there is a significant difference: Central Asian countries have managed to maintain a sufficient degree of cooperation on water. They could take advantage of many decades of close cooperation on water and energy during the Soviet period. Even though new cooperative frameworks established after the collapse of the Soviet Union were not fully efficient, they never disappeared and played a useful role.

The countries in the basin of the Tigris and Euphrates were not so lucky. They never managed to develop close cooperation on water and establish functioning legal and institutional cooperation frameworks. These countries came under the influence of different colonial powers and after gaining independence they were unable to develop effective and stable regional cooperation on water.

Climate change hit both regions very hard. At the beginning of this century non-cooperative water resources management in the Tigris-Euphrates basin could not counter the effects of the most devastating drought in 900 years. In Syria, as a result of a three-year period of extreme drought, 1.5 million people migrated to cities in search of livelihood. The huge number of internally displaced persons had more than likely contributed to the aggravation of the already bad socio-economic situation and helped spark the conflict.

Central Asia is in a luckier situation. The melting of glaciers results in increased water flows for a few decades. This gives time for Central Asian countries to prepare for the future and strengthen their resilience to the effects of climate change. According to current estimates, the peak water, after which glacier melt will not contribute any more to higher water flows, will be reached around the middle of the century. Using this time effectively to adapt the water sectors to the increasingly dramatic effects of climate change should become a shared strategic objective of Central Asian countries.

We are still at the very beginning of this research. We will continue to explore this extremely interesting topic. We hope that Central Asian students and researchers will join us in the future.

/Thank you!