We, the Ministers from Western Balkans responsible for the environment and climate change, gathered in Skopje on 21st November 2018 under the framework for the implementation of the South East Europe 2020 (SEE 2020) Strategy and its Environment Dimension,

STRESSING that good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation remain essential elements of the Enlargement Process, as well as of the Stabilisation and Association Process and WELCOMING the progress made so far,

RESTATING the importance of maintaining a permanent structured regional co-chaired dialogue and discussing the key priorities and challenges in the region,

ASSERTING our strong commitment to join efforts and call for concrete common action in addressing the existing environmental and climate challenges together with preventing and mitigating the future ones,

RECOGNIZING the need for strengthening regional cooperation and using the extraordinary momentum of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and in light of the preparations for the upcoming 24th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change,

CONSIGNANT of the findings of the RCC Study on Climate Change in the Western Balkans Region showing observed temperature increase of 1,2°C and expectation to warm further by alarming 1,7 - 4,0 ºC by the end of the century,

AWARE of the significant progress achieved so far in the implementation of a number of regional projects (RIPAP, Climaproof, Nexus and regional Biodiversity Taskforce (BDTF) among others),

DETERMINED to jointly respond and contribute to the 2030 energy and climate goals through effective policy development, implementation and enforcement of legislation as well as enhanced cross-sectoral cooperation,

AWARE of the huge challenges the transposition, implementation and enforcement of the acquis communautaire in the area of environment and climate action impose to the Western Balkans region,

REFRAMING our commitment to continue our approximation to the EU through policy harmonization, transition towards a circular economy and fulfilling commitments under international environment initiatives,

HONOURING the continued efforts by the EU institutions in strengthening of environment and climate institutions in Western Balkans and reinforcement of their administrative and technical capacities to cope with the challenges mentioned above,

WELCOMING the continued and unequivocal support by the EU for the European perspective of Western Balkans as reconfirmed by the Western Balkans Summit in Sofia as well as by the Western Balkans Summit in London, and a strong need to vigorously integrate elements of sustainability as well as climate protection and adaptation in the implementation of Regional Economic Area,

RECALLING the South East Europe 2020 Strategy adopted in November 2013 by our Governments, that provides a framework for strengthening regional cooperation and boosting prosperity, as well as commitments from Podgorica and Bonn Ministerial Declarations,

EXPRESSING our gratitude to the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and to the Host Government and the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning, for hosting and co-chairing this ministerial meeting and commending the work and outcomes of the Regional Working Group on Environment (RWG Env),

AND HAVING now agreed on the Joint Declaration by which we:

1. CALL for further strengthening of the synergies and regional cooperation for the implementation of the environment and climate change priorities in line with EU acquis, and maintaining policy dialogue within the RWG Env framework.

2. WELCOME the work performed by the RWG Env on the implementation of the Environment Dimension of the SEE 2020 Strategy coordinated by the RCC.

3. PRAISE the progress achieved in the implementation of the existing regional initiatives and projects financed by ADA (Climaproof and Nexus) through coordinated regional approach and WELCOME the potential for better understanding of local impacts of future climate patterns emerged from the initiatives such as the Summer School on High Resolution Climate Change Projections organised under the scope of the Climaproof project.

4. PRAISE the progress achieved by the Regional Biodiversity Task Force (BD TF) in defining priorities by 2020, planning of follow up activities and the first ever regional on the Fourth Ministerial Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP14) in Egypt, supported by GIZ ORF BDU and IUCN ECARO.

5. ACKNOWLEDGE the achievements of SWG RRD on supporting economic diversification, environmental protection and employment in rural areas of South East Europe with the aim of contributing to balanced socio-economic development, competitiveness and natural resource management, in targeted rural border regions, by improving policy-development processes, regional networking and encouraging community-based initiatives.

6. EXPRESS gratitude for the support provided by the European Commission and readiness to ACTIVELY ENGAGE and enable the effective implementation of on-going, new and future projects on environment and climate action such as Regional Implementation of Paris Agreement Project (RIPAP), the upcoming regional projects on Transition Towards the Low Emissions and Climate-resilient Economy, the EU Environment Partnership Programme for Accession, Twinning and TAEIX projects.

7. CALL for further mainstreaming and focusing of the EC assistance on the regional needs and priorities and stand ready to provide regional coordination and support for the implementation of the assistance through the existing RWG Env as an intergovernmental regional platform in the areas of environment and climate change.

8. PRAISE the progress achieved by the Energy Community Secretariat in advancing the work of the Energy and Climate Committee (ECC) and its Technical Working Group by launching a Talana regional dialogue, adopting a Recommendation on preparing for the development of integrated National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs), endorsing a Guidance document that explains the key steps from now until the finalisation of such plans, as well as by engaging with Contracting Parties in a discussion regarding 2030 energy efficiency, renewable energy sources and greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets that adequately reflect an equal EU ambition level.

9. SUPPORT a holistic approach towards achieving the 2030 Energy and Climate targets and express our commitment and readiness to strengthen cross-sectoral cooperation with RCC, the Energy Community and other relevant institutions in order to facilitate achievement of mandatory targets when adopted.

10. CALL for strengthening the role and capacities of local governments and implementation of concretes projects, exploiting potentials of state of the art technologies and smart solutions in environment protection and fight against climate change.

11. WELCOME the initiative of the UN Environment and the World Health Organization to address air pollution in the region, as one of the most significant environmental problems, which negatively impacts human health, and hampers economic development, and call for support to develop and maintain systems for monitoring, assessment and management of air quality.

12. WELCOME the initiative of UN Environment and its partners to promote climate change adaptation in mountain regions building on the results of the “Outlook on Climate Change Adaptation in the Western Balkans” financed by the Government of Austria and CALL for strengthened efforts towards climate change adaptation in mountain regions including regional dialogue and cooperative action.

13. COOPERATE on implementation of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and commitments to meet long-term goals.

14. COOPERATE in the area of environmental governance, aiming for the adoption and effective implementation of SEA and EIA procedures, also in a transboundary context, in line with EU standards and international conventions.

15. PROMOTE the transition to green and circular economy, making best use of the benefits and opportunities it offers for economic diversification, resource efficiency, climate protection and cooperative action.

16. INCREASE action to ensure the effective enforcement of legislation and fight against illegal activities that have an adverse impact on the environment.

17. SUPPORT mainstreaming of environment, climate change and sustainable development objectives in all policy areas and enhance cross-sector and inter-Ministerial cooperation.

18. SUPPORT the involvement of civil society on decision-making strategic planning and implementation, as well as results’ monitoring of environmental policy, programmes and plans, in line with the Aarhus convention.

19. CONTINUE to work with IPs to ensure that all partners engage in a planned strategy to reduce wasteful energy consumption and increase energy efficiency particularly in the residential, public and transport sectors.

20. COMMIT to further improve and share environmental information in order to ensure transparency, accountability and support evidence-base decision-making.

21. INCREASE the capabilities of national administrative structures to address environmental and climate changes, including where possible through enhancing capacity building.

22. MEET in one year time to assess progress on cooperation.

In Skopje,
21st November 2018