Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome on behalf of the OECD

- It is my honour to open the High Level meeting which aims to boost the impact of anti-corruption reforms in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

- This meeting is a great opportunity for anti-corruption decision-makers from the region to take stock of achievements and challenges and to set out strategic directions for further work as we move forward in the fight against corruption.

- Just a few weeks ago, Ministers of Justice and Attorney Generals from all over the world gathered here in Paris with a similar task for the OECD Anti-Bribery Ministerial Meeting. They stressed that enforcement of the Anti-Bribery Convention has had a significant impact on the global fight against corruption. All 41 signatories to the Convention have established foreign bribery as a serious offence. Many countries have stepped up prosecution of this offence. But the OECD Anti-Bribery Ministerial emphasised the importance of stronger enforcement in order to win this battle.

- The Ministerial Meeting also stressed the importance of our role in the broader, global fight against corruption, beyond the supply side of cross-border bribes. Many of the foreign bribery cases that are sanctioned in countries of the OECD Working Group on Bribery involve non-member countries, such as those in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

- Moreover, foreign bribery cases are now coming to light thanks to the efforts of some of your law enforcement agencies. Romania has commendably set the trend by its investigations into corruption which uncovered the domestic side of an impressive number of foreign bribery cases. Romania has also, along with some other countries of the region
(notably Croatia, Georgia, Lithuania and Serbia), provided excellent mutual legal assistance in foreign bribery cases to Austria, Germany, France, Switzerland, Sweden, the UK, the US, and other OECD countries, making their enforcement success possible.

- VimpelCom, the world’s sixth largest telecom operator, admitted to bribing a government official in Uzbekistan to gain entry into the country and agreed to pay $795m in penalties to US and Dutch authorities. Its Uzbek subsidiary, Unitel, pleaded guilty in a US court to conspiring to violate the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act by paying $114m in bribes to the official.

- The sheer scale of these cases shows the damage that corruption causes to your countries. Corruption is one of the most pressing challenges of our time. It is wasteful and immoral. It promotes mistrust in institutions and markets. It is bad for business and undermines growth. Fighting this crime must therefore remain a top priority.

- The complexity of these cases also shows that one prosecutor in one country will never be able to resolve them alone. Effective international cooperation and mutual legal assistance is paramount to tackle modern corruption schemes. For international cooperation to be effective, international conventions and bilateral agreements alone are not enough. We need effective and independent justice systems and we need direct contacts and trust between law-enforcement practitioners from different countries.

- Two major scandals have stunned the world in recent weeks. First, the Unaoil bribery scandal – one of the biggest corruption scandals in history, allegedly involving a web of corruption on behalf of some of the world’s most prominent Multi-National Enterprises. Now, the Panama Papers. The "Panama Papers" that were leaked recently raised allegations involving over 100 politicians and world leaders, 200 countries and territories, and major banks that can potentially reveal tax and accounting fraud, money laundering, cross border corruption and the misuse of development aid.

- Despite the huge scale of these scandals, international efforts to increase transparency of offshore companies, such as enforcement of the OECD Multilateral Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters, are starting to produce good results. However, to
have real impact in our fight against safe heavens, it is crucial that countries work together to collectively combat scandals such as these.

- One of the countries in your region – Ukraine – has recently introduced new and very strong rules on transparency of beneficial ownership. This is a crucial step towards greater accountability, and a stronger democracy.

- The OECD is also making good progress in strengthening international standards for the prevention of corruption and ensuring integrity in the public and the private sectors. The OECD Public Governance Committee is currently finalising the Recommendation on Public Integrity. The Recommendation will provide a comprehensive perspective in designing a coherent and focused integrity and anti-corruption strategy for the public sector and society as a whole. This Recommendation is still a draft but it is expected to be adopted at the end of this year after the completion of the public consultations. This new standard will be an important guide for OECD countries, as well as for your region.

- Last year, the OECD updated its Principles on Corporate Governance, as well as the Guidelines for State Owned Enterprises. Both standards provide practical and robust guidance for better governance of private or state companies. They can also help you design and implement measures to prevent corruption in the business sector.

- The creation of standards is only the start. Enforcement of these standards must follow.

- I therefore very much welcome the new Work Programme of the OECD Anti-Corruption Network for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which focuses on enforcement.

- The Summary report "Fighting Corruption in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in 2013-2015" establishes an excellent evidentiary basis for the new Work Programme. It gives a very clear view of the progress achieved in this region, including reform of anti-corruption policies, legislation and institutions. The report provides recommendations for further reforms, and emphasises the importance of enforcement.

- The Work Programme will put the recommendations in practice. The 4th round of monitoring under the Istanbul Action Plan will assess implementation of anti-corruption policies and
enforcement of anti-corruption laws; it will include in-depth assessments of anti-corruption measures in selected sectors.

- The Law-Enforcement Network for Eastern Europe and Central Asia will help practitioners tackle new and complex forms of corruption crimes, and maintain the valuable professional contacts that are so necessary for effective international cooperation. Law-enforcement practitioners from your region will also have the privilege to work together with the Global Law-Enforcement Network that was established last year.

- The ACN remains committed to building capacity and sharing good practices on business integrity and corruption prevention in the public sector, and to supporting individual countries in their anti-corruption reforms.

- The ACN is already engaged in in the OECD Anti-Corruption Project for Ukraine, anti-corruption being one of the key parts of the Memorandum of Cooperation between Ukraine and the OECD. Ensuring the success of reforms in this country will be crucial for the region, and the OECD is committed to contribute to this success. The ACN also launched country projects with Kyrgyzstan, Romania, and will be ready to help other active anti-corruption reformers in the region.

- The implementation of this ambitious but achievable Work Programme relies on our commitment and each other’s support. Since the establishment of the ACN in 1998, OECD donor countries were the main funders of this work. Over the past several years, your countries and international partner organisations have also contributed to ACN funding by hosting events and financing own expenses related to the Work Programme Implementation. This is a promising development that demonstrates real ownership of the ACN by its members. Building on this, we invite you to support the new Work Programme. This is vital to ensure the full and effective implementation of the planned activities. This will send a strong signal that countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia are taking responsibility for anti-corruption reforms in the region, acting as equal partners to our OECD donors.

- We have to be serious about our commitments to fighting corruption. All of us here have something to contribute. Important events are being held at the OECD this week, such as
this high-level meeting today and OECD Integrity Week. All of which, like the OECD Anti-Bribery Ministerial Meeting in March, can be catalysts for a renewed anti-corruption drive globally. The upcoming UK Anti-Corruption Summit in May 2016 and France’s Anti-Corruption Conference to be held at the OECD in June 2016, also provide significant opportunities to keep the momentum going to enhance and expand anti-corruption efforts. The OECD remains committed to combating corruption in all its forms and we look forward to continuing to work closely with you to end impunity and level the playing field in international business.

- For all of you who have brought your determination and your expertise to this meeting, I welcome you and look forward to our discussions today.