Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you to this event to mark the start of implementation of the new EU Council Decision in support of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, which was adopted by EU Ministers in January.

Since 2006, the EU has provided dedicated funding of nearly 10 million Euros to the BTWC Implementation Support Unit to promote universal adherence to the Convention and support national implementation in countries outside the EU.

What has been achieved in 13 years? Quite a lot, I would say:

- 27 new States have joined the BTWC. Almost all of them have participated in the EU-funded regional workshops, benefited from universalization visits or received other assistance.

- A number of States Parties have received tailored expert assistance which has helped them to strengthen their national legislation relevant for the BTWC, enhance dual use export controls, improve biosecurity and biosafety in laboratories, and plan emergency response.

- Our transparency and confidence-building efforts have contributed to better national implementation and enhanced confidence in compliance, and here I can mention the EU-funded CBM guide, the national implementation guide, and the electronic CBM platform to facilitate the submission of CBM declarations. Furthermore, voluntary peer review initiatives have opened up a completely new channel for international cooperation. Let me emphasize that their objective is not to replace legally-binding verification measures on which there is no consensus between the States Parties.

- Awareness raising activities have taken place among science and technology stakeholders to increase their knowledge of the BTWC and the potential implications and risks of biological research.
Dozens of States in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe have participated in regional workshops which have increased not only the level of knowledge and knowhow, but helped to establish contacts and networks between government officials in neighbouring countries, facilitating the sharing of information and best practices.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The threat of proliferation of biological and toxin weapons remains real in light of rapid advancements in life sciences. We must remain vigilant and ensure that our respective governance structures - legislation, administration, judicial systems, law enforcement - are up to date to minimize the risk of malicious use of pathogens or toxins and that we are well prepared and in a position to respond quickly to the challenges when needed. This is essentially a national responsibility, but international cooperation and assistance can play a useful role in building the necessary capacities for national implementation of the BTWC.

I hope today's launch event will be of interest to both potential beneficiary countries as well as donors, and that we can all learn more about the upcoming assistance activities which will again be implemented by the BTWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU) within the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA).

I would like to conclude by extending a warm thank you to UNODA and the ISU for organizing this event, and most importantly, express our appreciation for the outstanding work you have carried out over the past years to implement the EU-funded projects. We are very pleased to continue to work together with you and support this important Convention. It is a key pillar of the multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation architecture to which the European Union attaches the utmost importance.

Also many thanks to all speakers who have made themselves available today to share their experiences with the EU-funded projects. You are doing a very important work on the ground.

I thank you all.