

Intervention at the Commission Session

Excellencies,
Director-General,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear colleagues,

We are here today to celebrate 70 years of achievements in UNECE. There is a lot to celebrate.

The vision for our organization, as stated in resolution 1, was constructive economic cooperation to the maintenance of peace. During the difficult days of the Cold War, UNECE was one of the few places, if not the only place, where countries cooperated peacefully across different political systems, with a positive impact on the life of citizens throughout the region. Despite significant tensions in other areas, the technical work in UNECE continued to support economic cooperation in a fragmented Europe – quietly, constructively.

Hundreds of norms, standards and conventions have been negotiated, often without creating headlines, but always with a positive impact on the daily life of citizens. Tools like the TIR Convention, EDIFACT and CEFAC standards has saved companies billions of dollars by cutting red tape and avoiding delays at our borders. The reduction in air pollution under the Air convention has increased the average life span of our citizens by around one year. The agricultural standards guide a significant part of world trade in fruit and vegetables and has given better products to consumers and higher prices to farmers. The global harmonized system for chemicals has improved safety substantially and saved companies for millions of dollars. These are just a few examples. UNECE has been connecting countries, driving progress and impacting people's lives throughout these 70 years.

Our work is a testament to the value of international cooperation and its concrete benefits. UNECE brings life to the values of the UN Charter. At a time when international cooperation is questioned in some quarters, we are a tangible proof that we can achieve concrete results. And, if I may add, these results are an excellent value for money.

Our anniversary is a moment to look back, but, just as much, a time to look ahead. Our region, and the world at large, have changed in many ways. New organizations have emerged and the economic dynamics are significantly different from those in Europe right after WWII. Our membership has grown significantly. Yet, despite all these fundamental changes, the work of UNECE is a steady force that remains highly relevant. We provide normative instruments that glue the economies of our region together. We contribute to the “hidden integration” of UNECE region.

In many ways UNECE is an expression of what is now referred to as cooperative sovereignty. Sovereign national states engaging in beneficial cooperation. And beneficial cooperation that strengthens the sovereignty of the national state. But it is also an example of what is called responsible sovereignty or even the sovereign obligation. The obligation of states to cooperate on

the necessary norms, standards and conventions that can address threats and ensure peace and progress for all citizens. This is especially urgent in Europe – having been so divided, but also a region with a strong historic will to become united. Here we must not waver.

We owe it to the first Executive Secretary of UNECE, Gunnar Myrdal, but most importantly to ourselves and to our citizens to keep alive the idea of an integrated Europe transcending the divisions of the Second World War, the Cold War and the current tensions and divisions.

Here UNECE provides a well-tested, reliable platform where a wide array of experts come together to develop common norms, standards and legal instruments to address real life obstacles and to ensure closer economic cooperation and integration. And it is a impressive platform. UNECE supports 218 bodies, including 31 convention bodies, 50 subsidiary bodies and 137 expert bodies. We hold around 900 meetings and issue around 600 parliamentary documents every year. For each working day it is more than four meetings and three documents. Every day. This is per staff member far the highest efficiency in the UN Secretariat.

And UNECE's work makes a difference – the best proof is the fact that many of the instruments hosted in UNECE generate interest and is used well beyond the region, often worldwide. And we see it in the many new partnerships, not least within the UN System, we have established in recent years.

We owe the success of this work to the commitment and leadership of our member States. Thank you for your trust in our organization and for your political support. I would also like to acknowledge the contributions of UNECE staff – colleagues who serve today and work hard to implement the mandates entrusted to us, just as well as those who came before us. I would like to welcome here today two former Executive Secretaries, Ms Brigita Schmognerova and Mr. Yves Berthelot. Thank you for your strong achievements and for joining us for this anniversary Commission session.

I often say that UNECE is an organization whose time has come. Our strong normative role is critical in an even more interconnected world. And it is key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. A revitalized multilateral agenda must be built on a strong, inclusive normative framework. Norms, standards and conventions that can help the nation state, build the institutional backbone needed for globalization to work. This is what the UNECE can offer. And this is what our region and the world needs.

If we get it right, the benefits will be substantial.

In 2030 freight transport can be totally digitalized allowing for cargo and containers to move automatically from trucks, to rail, to ships and air and fast and secure across borders facilitated also by efficient trade procedures.

In 2030 we can have smart and sustainable cities using digital solutions and shared services with affordable and energy efficient housing, clean, quiet and healthy transport with cities designed for walking and biking and new autonomous and shared electric or hydrogen vehicles.

In 2030 we can have reduced air pollution significantly adding another year to the average life-span of our citizens and strong cooperation between countries to protect the quality of water.

In 2030 we could have millions of new jobs in the green economy, boosted the production of sustainable agricultural products, minimized food loss and we could have 10% more forests, all managed sustainably and biodiversity losses reversed.

In 2030 we could have meaningful and effective public participation leading to sustainable decision making and we could have significantly increased the use of efficient people-first public-private partnerships to invest in sustainable development.

In 2030 we could have fully integrated energy markets in Europe allowing energy from the sun, the wind, water and waves to act in synergy throughout the continent, unleashing enormous forces of innovation, reducing carbon intensity significantly and improving the quality of life delivered by energy.

These are just examples. All examples are closely related to the work of UNECE. All examples will help us implement the Sustainable Development Goals. But none of this will happen without a strengthened normative framework. UNECE is ready to support our member States every step of the way.

To be ready for this ambitious agenda, we must be still more efficient and effective. During the past years, we have ensured that the UNECE house is in order. We have aligned and strengthened programmes in support of the Sustainable Development Goals; created new cross-sectoral initiatives, increased transparency greatly; agreed on broad range of new and improved procedures for projects and programmes, we have a new evaluation policy, gender policy and strengthened practice, climate-neutral strategy and we have implemented all recommendations from audits and evaluations and have improved visibility with a new website, logo, slogan, blogs and communication strategy.

We have strengthened our cooperation within the UN, with the regional UN System and with other international organizations; and established the Regional Forum for Sustainable Development.

We have also deepened our programmatic reach. We have seen increased accession to conventions and legal instruments, strengthened efforts on Road Safety with the UN SG Envoy Mr. Jean Todt and a proposal for a Road Safety Fund, we have new work on Public-Private Partnerships and energy efficiency standards in buildings, hopefully soon also on geospatial information management and a lot more. This positive trend continues and is reflected in the many draft decisions that will be tabled in this Commission Session.

I would like to congratulate all member States who have jointly made these achievements possible. We are on a good path but there is more work to be done.

We cannot change the past. But we have the power to shape the future. We have the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which provides a unique opportunity. And we have an obligation – a sovereign obligation, an institutional obligation, a personal obligation - to do our

outmost to ensure economic integration and cooperation to support the maintenance of peace and to enable all countries of our region to implement the Sustainable Development Goals.

I wish us all a successful Commission session.

Thank you.