



**PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

**Keynote address**

**by**

**Ms. Olga Algayerova**

**United Nations Under-Secretary-General**

**Executive Secretary**

**of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

**at the**

**2021 Planet Budapest Summit**

**Session 4: “Central Europe and the Visegrád Countries for Sustainability – Champions or Laggards?”**

**Budapest, 1 December 2021**

**9:30 AM - 11:00 AM**

Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a real pleasure to address you today at the Planet Budapest Summit, both as a representative of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and in my personal capacity as a native of a Visegrad country. In fact, earlier this year in June, I spoke at a Visegrad event where the four countries launched a new campaign on cooperation for sustainability.

In April this year, my organization held its own Commission session on the theme “**Promoting circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources in the UNECE region**”. There, we heard from representatives of all the countries present on this panel about interesting sustainability actions they are undertaking, including for example green buses and tree planting programmes in Hungary; increased waste recycling in Slovakia; a €10 million Research and Technical Innovation Programme on Circular Economy Projects in Austria; and a Czech initiative to replace single-use plastics with reusables.

I am very pleased to see that the commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals and to international cooperation continues in both the Visegrad countries and more broadly in Central Europe, as evidenced by this panel today. There is a lot of work ahead of us. But I believe that, working together and with a strong commitment to our goals, we can get there.

**Sustainability is indeed the defining, existential challenge of our time.** Nothing short of a global transformation will do. Innovation and pragmatism are required to succeed – and all this at a rapid pace.

I. The challenges are formidable:

---

- Earlier this year, UNECE issued a status report on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in our region. At the current pace, the region would achieve 23 targets by 2030. Progress in 57 targets should accelerate. For 9 others, trends are negative and need to be reversed. For 80 targets, almost half of the total, there is no sufficient national data to track change over time.
- Much needs to be done in critical areas related to climate change and the environment, including the conservation of ecosystems, biodiversity, disaster resilience, waste generation and treatment and the sustainable use of natural resources.
- For the EU, much progress has been achieved in different areas. Still, a fundamental challenge remains: Reconciling the aspirations for increased prosperity with the reduction of environmental pressures and rapid progress towards climate neutrality.

I welcome the strong ambition shown in the European Green Deal, including the commitment to cut greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030. This will unleash a wave of transformation across many sectors and activities, including in areas such as transport, energy or housing, where UNECE is deeply engaged.

This ambition is necessary, as our performance towards achieving the 2030 Agenda has to improve.

Let me mention a few key factors that are indispensable to generate sufficient engagement and strong impact.

**Collaborative approaches, alliances and partnerships are key.**

We must:

---

- i. Use the opportunities created by recovery plans from COVID-19 to provide a new impetus to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The UN Secretary-General has identified this recovery as a chance to “build back better”. We don’t have to go back to our past, often destructive habits. We can use this opportunity to reset in order to take more sustainable actions. For example, in their recovery plans, many governments foresee investing in infrastructure and other sectors of the economy to kickstart growth. These investments should be aligned with the 2030 Agenda and promote sustainability.
  - ii. Plan with a transboundary perspective: Actions in one country can impact the environment, connectivity and life quality in others. For UNECE, addressing transboundary issues is a major area of work. Let me give one example: Air pollution can travel hundreds of kilometers from its origin and cannot be tackled only by local solutions. UNECE hosts the Air Convention, which promotes international cooperation to address this problem and has actually increased life expectancy by a whole year in the region. This shows you the importance and the potential of transboundary cooperation!
  - iii. Create synergies through cross-sectoral action: The goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda are interlinked, because actions in one sector impact others. For example, SDG 11 calls for safe and inclusive cities, but cities will not be safe if we do not also achieve SDG 3 on health, and specifically its target 3.6 on halving deaths from road accidents. To address such interlinkages, a whole-of-government approach is necessary, and I urge all countries to enhance coordination structures even further.
  - iv. Secure sustainable financing: Financing is key to transform our ambitions into reality. However, governments alone cannot mobilise the considerable investments in infrastructure needed to
-

achieve the 2030 Agenda. We need to involve the private sector. To optimize this involvement and obtain efficient and sustainable outcomes, two factors should be remembered:

- First, project design and implementation should follow internationally agreed standards. This is key to boost investor confidence and interest.
- Second, robust legal and regulatory frameworks should be established to ensure good governance.

### **The potential of regional action**

International cooperation is the other key factor that is absolutely necessary. I mentioned earlier several national initiatives undertaken by Central European countries. UNECE has a rich body of tools which can enable and support the implementation of such initiatives. And these are developed thanks to international cooperation. We provide a platform where our 56 member States can exchange experiences and learn from each other on these topics. Our strong convening power thus brings together 18,000 experts who collaborate on norms, standards and legal instruments in a variety of fields pertaining to sustainable development. These include, for example, a UN **Framework Classification for Resources** which applies to anthropogenic resources that are normally considered waste. Our **standards for traceability and transparency in textiles, meanwhile, promote sustainable garment and footwear supply chains**, which generate less waste.

Together with our member States, we strive to achieve a double-digit rate of circularity in the UNECE region by 2023.

---

We also offer **technical assistance** to support implementation in our region. At the request of countries, we carry out performance reviews in fields such as innovation, housing, road safety, environment and trade facilitation, in order to assess country policies against international best practice, identify gaps and provide recommendations for alignment.

### **Our common agenda**

For further inspiration, I would like to draw your attention to the report of the UN Secretary-General, entitled “**Our Common Agenda**”. It represents his vision on the future of global cooperation and reinvigorating inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism. Among the twelve themes are gender equality, protecting our planet, improving digital cooperation, working with youth, ensuring sustainable financing and boosting partnerships, to name but a few.

I encourage you to consult the report and to mainstream these 12 areas in your roadmaps, plans and programmes, both at national and at regional levels.

In closing, let me affirm the relevance of regional collaboration in advancing the 2030 Agenda – in fact, its importance is likely to increase even further. There is also need for thought leadership and strong engines for change to build political momentum across the region. UNECE looks forward to working with all its member States as we move towards a more sustainable future.

I wish you inspiring and ambitious discussions.  
Thank you.

---