



**Interview with Mrs Olga Algayerova, Executive Secretary of the United Nations
Economic Commission for Europe
28th January 2021**

FSPI: The UNECE was conceptualized and introduced in 1947 during the transitional period between the Second World War and the Cold War. It carried the legacy of interwar internationalism, wartime planning and postwar relief cooperation, as well as the consequences of emerging tensions between the Soviet Union and the Western Allies. But the UNECE was more than simply an American Solution to European problems. In this complex relationship of competition and interdependence the UNECE was nevertheless able historically to carve a role for itself. In today's multipolar world, which is much more fragmented than that of 1947, how does the Commission see its role?

Olga Algayerova: UNECE was founded in the wake of World War II, with the goal to promote economic cooperation and integration among the war-ravaged economies of the pan-European region. For over 70 years, and even during the height of the Cold War, we have been bringing the East and the West together to collaborate peacefully on technical norms and standards. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, all of these norms and standards have been aligned to support the implementation of the SDGs. We work in several fields such as transport, trade facilitation, statistics, environment, housing etc.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting recession, our mandate to promote economic cooperation and integration and help restore ravaged economies remains as relevant as ever. In fact, I would say it is even more relevant than before. The world will need enormous rebuilding to recover from the COVID-19 crisis. The UN Secretary-General has identified this is an opportunity to create more sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies. We don't have to go back to our old habits. By aligning rebuilding efforts with the SDGs, we can indeed "build back better". And UNECE has the tools to support member States in doing so.

FSPI: As UN regional economic commission, UNECE plays an important role in implementing the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals, while offering a platform for governments to engage with all stakeholders on norms, standards and conventions. Its Regional Forum took place for the third time in March 2019 and was mainly devoted to the exchange of experiences made by the member States in implementing the SDGs. What are the priority goals for which UNECE supports concrete cooperation between governments? Can you illustrate this cooperation with a few examples?

Olga Algayerova: UNECE is dedicated to supporting the implementation of the SDGs. However, as a technical organization, our mandate does not cover all the SDGs equally. In order to concentrate our efforts in the most productive way, we have actually identified 9 SDGs. These are the ones where we make the biggest contributions, and they cover three main strategic areas:

- Improving connectivity within the region (SDGs, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13)
- Reducing environmental pressures and using resources more sustainably (SDGs 3, 6, 7, 12, 13, 15)
- Contributing to creating more dynamic and resilient economies (SDGs 7, 8, 9, 11, 13)

Under these SDGs, we assist member States by:

- Supporting evidence-based decision-making through reliable statistics and improved monitoring, analysis, and policy advice
- Fostering cooperation among all stakeholders at the country and regional level
- Building countries' capacities to implement its norms, conventions and standards, which offer practical tools to improve people's everyday lives

In addition, we have SDG 5 on gender equality, which is mainstreamed in all our work, and SDG17 on partnerships – here we foster partnerships between all different stakeholders in the efforts towards the SDGs, including academia, the private sector and civil society.

FSPI: Through the UN75 initiative launched by SG Guterres in January 2020, the UN has thought to understand what are the issues citizens around the world perceive as most pressing. While the pandemic COVID-19 reversed progress in human development and widened inequalities, the immediate and short-term priorities for respondents from poor countries are principally universal access to healthcare, more investment in education and access to safe water and sanitation. Beyond the general call from all respondents around the world to the UN to be more inclusive, accountable and effective, which immediate and longer-term global challenges do European countries with higher human development want the UN to address?

Olga Algayerova: Well, if you read the news just from the past few week, you can see very clear signals from various leaders about their priorities. The new US President rejoined the Paris Agreement on his first day in office. At the World Economic Forum just a few days ago, the President of the European Commission called for a global “Paris-style agreement” to protect biodiversity, highlighting that biodiversity is key for mitigating climate change, economic growth, and protection from future pandemics caused by zoonosis. The EU has the European Green Deal and “strives to be the first climate-neutral continent”. You can tell that protecting the environment, whether it is fighting climate change or safeguarding biodiversity, is a main priority for these countries. And of course these are all global concerns. Every country, every citizen has to be included in these efforts. You asked about immediate and longer-term global

challenges – in my mind we will not even have a longer-term future if we do not address the immediate challenge of climate change and sustainable economic growth. 2020 alone has experienced so many extreme weather events, floods, draughts and wildfires, impacting millions of people around the world. Our challenge is urgent and immediate.

In fact, member States have given us the same signal at UNECE. Our next biennial Commission session, which is our highest intergovernmental meeting, will take place in April. Already one year ago, member States designated a theme to frame discussions at the event: “Promoting a circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources in the UNECE region.” So you can see that the topic of sustainable economic growth and environmental protection are key in the minds of all UNECE countries.

FSPI: While the European region faces huge challenges, in particular the migrants and refugees issue, the post-Brexit issue, the financial and budgetary consequences of the pandemic crisis, the raise of populist movements and the loss of confidence in democratic institutions, just to mention a few, what are the main achievements of UNECE during the last decade in promoting economic integration as a path to peace in the region?

Olga Algayerova: We have seen strong engagement in the last decade, especially in Eastern parts of the region, towards the increasing use of UNECE's tools. For example, despite political tensions amongst neighbours, the Water Convention is being seized in Central Asia, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus as a platform for cooperation on shared water resources. This key tool has been recognized by the Security Council as a means to support water cooperation as a foundation for peace and stability, hence the increasing interest of several African countries – with accessions of Chad, Senegal and Ghana in the last few years alone.

In some cases, such as through the use of UNECE's agricultural quality standards in Central Asia, our tools make a direct contribution to development in fragile areas like the Fergana Valley shared by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, thus strengthening peace.

Integrated and inter-dependent economies also strengthen the foundations for peace and shared prosperity. Over the last decade, we have seen an important trend towards physical connectivity across the region through cooperation at UNECE on transport links across all modes – road, rail and inland waterway. Increased digitalization in this area, such as with the move towards fully paperless operation of the TIR Convention for international freight through the “eTIR” system, and through our hundreds of trade and e-business standards, provides a common language that is further supporting integration, across borders and sectors.

FSPI: The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented challenge hitting all countries by various economic shocks on demand, supply and financing, while severely affecting the very fabric of international economic relations, in particular trade and transport. Which mechanisms use the UNECE to support member States in their efforts to tackle the crisis and promote a sustainable recovery?

Olga Algayerova: UNECE's contribution to address this crisis and its consequences includes some instruments that were relevant in the initial emergency situation and many others that can be used to reduce risk and “recover better”.

Our Action Framework for Responses to the COVID-19 crisis includes three main pillars:

- Facilitate connectivity, including by enhanced cooperation and implementation of a regulatory framework for border crossings and the use of digital tools in trade and transport
- Address transboundary and other risks, through the use of UNECE multilateral agreements, standards and statistical frameworks for informed decision-making
- Support a green and resilient recovery, including by improved resource use and the promotion of the circular economy, tapping into the potential of cities as drivers of the recovery and the development of sustainable infrastructure.

FSPI: Enhancing resilience and efficiency through improved resource use including through circular economy approaches is apparently one important policy tool advocated by UNECE. Which instruments and standards in this regard does it put in place to increase the resilience to health, social and economic repercussions of the COVID-19?

Olga Algayerova: As I mentioned before, this is precisely the topic of our upcoming Commission session in April. In preparation for this meeting, we are compiling a Toolbox that lists all our relevant products. I can tell you that the list is very long! Let me give you just a few non-exhaustive examples:

- Our Conference of European Statisticians is working with other international organizations towards the development of a harmonised approach to measuring circular economy, so that we can measure our progress and monitor the effectiveness of policy interventions.
- Our economic cooperation and integration subprogramme works to harness the power of innovation as a driver for circularity and to benefit from public private partnerships, as a way to mobilize public and private investment for a transition to a more circular economy.
- In Trade, we aim to reduce resource-use caused by trade and supply chain disruptions; to foster transparency and traceability of supply chains to transform particularly resource intensive sectors; and to address novel policy challenges, such as food-loss/waste in agricultural trade and supply chains.
- Our subprogramme on Forestry and Timber addresses questions of circular economy along the entire production chain of forest-derived goods, and promotes sustainably produced forest products.
- Our Sustainable Energy subprogramme is designed to improve access to affordable and clean energy for all and help reduce greenhouse gas emissions and the carbon footprint of the energy sector in the region.

FSPI: Since multilateralism appears to be a necessity more than ever and the UN should be more inclusive while engaging with all stakeholders, the private public partnership between public entities and private sector is presumably a building block of the regional cooperation. Which role has UNECE in promoting this partnership among its member States and within each of them?

Olga Algayerova: The involvement of the private sector is absolutely essential to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. For one thing, the Agenda requires considerable investments in infrastructure. Governments alone cannot mobilize the sums needed. So of course, we need to involve the private sector. However, this cooperation needs to be take place according to well-established standards, in order to prevent conflicts of interest and achieve effective results towards the SDGs. In recognition of this fact, UNECE has been working for several years on standards and guidelines for public-private partnerships in

various fields. When PPPs are formulated according to internationally agreed guidelines, it also increases investor confidence and makes it easier for governments to attract funds. In the past few years, we have developed Guiding Principles on what we call “People-first” PPPs. They provide guidance material and policy recommendations for sustainable infrastructure investments which put the needs of people first and are aligned with the SDGs. They have attracted great interest and we work closely with member States to build capacity and support their implementation.

Let me also quickly mention another area where we have significant engagement, and this is road safety. Road traffic accidents kill over a million people a year worldwide. UNECE hosts the UN Road Safety Fund, which aims to help low- and middle-income countries put in place effective national road safety systems. In addition to member States, it has quite a few private sector donors such as Total, Michelin and Pirelli.

FSPI: By becoming an important platform for technical cooperation, the Commission has brought hundreds of agreements to fruition, which taken together form a major achievement with real benefits. Its work also enhances the role of experts in multilateralism. For example the Aarhus Convention (UNECE Convention on access to information, public participation in decision making and access to justice in environmental matter) is in our view a success story for multilateralism, so much decried elsewhere. How can this work be made more visible?

Olga Algayerova: While most people may not realize it, UNECE tools impact our everyday lives. For instance: harmonized vehicle standards, road signs and traffic rules save thousands of lives every year in Europe and in many other countries. These instruments are the fruit of UN agreements and are negotiated and constantly updated by experts here at UNECE.

Or, consider that an extra year has been added to life expectancy in Europe since 1990 thanks to reductions in emissions that pollute the air. Well, these reductions were achieved through our binding Air Convention. The Convention dates back to 1979, to the height of the Cold War. But recognizing the importance of this issue, countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain came together to adopt a unique regional treaty to tackle this key common challenge. In these and many other areas, such achievements are possible thanks to the involvement of thousands of experts, across diverse sectors, and of the engagement of governments, companies and others in implementing our tools.

You mentioned the Aarhus Convention. Indeed, we can be proud of its success over the last twenty years in putting the principle of “environmental democracy” into action. This has inspired the negotiation of a similar agreement in Latin America. I hope that the active engagement through the Convention will continue to inspire the efforts of citizens and NGOs around the world, together with governments and other stakeholders, in working together to protect and shape their environment.

As we look to the future of multilateralism as the United Nations turns 75, I also hope we will continue to strengthen the inclusiveness of the ways we cooperate, and to engage with different audiences. At UNECE we are taking steps in this direction: our first Forum of Mayors was held last October with the strong engagement of the Mayor of Geneva and mayors from over 40 cities across the region. It was a clear demonstration of the potential of reinforcing the links between our multilateral work and concrete experiences and solutions at the local level.