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Opening Statement

of Ms. Olga Algayerova,

**Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic
Commission for Europe and Under-Secretary General of the
United Nations**

**at the 2022 SPECA Economic Forum
Greener and Safer Future**

Almaty, 16 November 2022

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to address the annual SPECA Economic Forum.

First, I would like to express my sincere **gratitude to the Government of Kazakhstan** for generously hosting the SPECA events in 2022 as part of their chairmanship of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia this year! And to **ESCAP** – and personally to Armida - for your leadership in coordinating the preparations on behalf of the Regional Commissions. This has been a difficult year for all of us, including for Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, with active leadership and will for collaboration in the Programme, we are moving ahead.

Kazakhstan has been **one of the initiators** of the United Nations Special Programme for the economies of Central Asia (SPECA) and actively supports it both in terms of contributions to its **substantive work and through financial contributions**. I encourage the other countries to follow this approach. Regional cooperation, including through SPECA, has significant potential to help solve the key problems our region is facing today.

Today, the UNECE region faces a multi-pronged and complex crisis. The war in Ukraine has exacerbated the already complex connectivity challenges for Central Asia, while redrawing the map of trade and

transport links, and affecting economies of the region in a multi-dimensional way. As I am just back from COP27, we must not let these developments distract our attention from the climate crisis, which causes an existential threat to the mere future of humanity. Finally, one of the SPECA participating countries - Afghanistan – is experiencing serious challenges, and its northern neighbours are significantly affected.

These crises wipe out much of what has been achieved before and take away significant resources that would have otherwise been used to achieve sustainable development. This is one more reason for us to come together. Let me cite just several examples of possible contributions to this regional development:

- 1. The first example is about action at the city level.** UNECE – often jointly with ESCAP and other partners - promotes smart sustainable urban development; urban economic resilience and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and disasters at city level. UNECE assists cities in developing their economic recovery and resilience plans, identification of possible funding sources. Smart sustainable cities profiles were developed for Astana and Bishkek. Together with UN-Habitat we support Bishkek and Dushanbe in the development of their SDG voluntary local reviews.

The SPECA Working Group on Water, Energy and Environment can be a good platform to take this osprey forward.

The second example is about digitalization for improved connectivity. Digitalization is of key importance for the seamless exchange of data and documents for international trade, transport, and border crossing operations.

The road to full digitalization of UN inland transport legal instruments is one of the spearpoints of the 2030 UNECE Inland Transport Committee Strategy. Interconnection of national customs systems with the eTIR International system has been finalized for several countries, including Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, and is opening for other SPECA countries. The eCMR Protocol is also offering new opportunities for trade and transport in the region.

This is an important development, and I call on all the SPECA countries to take full advantage of it, and to bring the message on the importance of the UN legal tools to the discussions with key partners, including at the upcoming EU-Central Asia meeting in Samarkand later this week. We also need to ensure that SPECA establishes a clear connection with the projects of Multilateral Development Banks, including those part of Team Europe, the ADB, the Eurasian Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank.

Dear colleagues, let me also remind you that the leaders of the Central Asian countries share a political will for the digitalization of logistics.

Fragmented digitalization of separate elements of the supply chain does not make sense. It is important that the digitalization of trade and transport document procedures are aligned to a common reference. The best options are the **UN/CEFACT** semantic standards and reference data models, with which sectorial standards are interoperable. The UN/CEFACT Multimodal Transport Reference Data Model is already used in preparing the implementation of the Electronic Freight Transport Information Regulation of the European Union, and we call on the SPECA countries to use its full potential, also ensuring their traders have full compatibility with the important European market and beyond.

In this connection, let me highlight the important step in aligning our work on digitalization and connectivity taken at the high-level conference in Baku just 3 weeks ago. We thank Azerbaijan for hosting it, and express hope for our continued engagement in follow-up to the Conference.

The third example is about the complex water-energy-food nexus, of particular importance in Central Asia. I am very pleased to share that UNECE will be partnering with the German Government, OECD, FAO, EBRD and IFAS to ensure a well-

coordinated and smart mix of policy approaches – within a brand-new program we are about to launch. We hope that you will all engage with our Water Team in finding sustainable solutions for integrated management of **transboundary waters**, in looking for optimal low-carbon paths for the **energy transition**, and in promoting productive, green and circular **agricultural practices**. The second Almaty Energy Forum – concluded yesterday - was one of the important milestones in this regard, and I am thankful to the Kazakhstan hosts, UNDP, UNESCO, and other partners in helping us advance this agenda.

Finally, **another example** is linked to **sustainable trade and circular economy**. As these topics are very important for Central Asia, UNECE contributes through projects on transparency and traceability of cotton supply chains and the implementation of the SPECA Principles of Sustainable Trade, policy dialogues on the circular economy in the SPECA countries.

Your two-day deliberations at this Forum are expected to contribute to the drafting of an Almaty Declaration marking the path for further green development. It will reaffirm important pledges made last year in Tashkent. This declaration is also particularly timely for us, as it is fully articulated with the theme of our Commission session in April next year, which is **enabling digital and green transformations for sustainable development in the ECE region**.

Among other key commitments, we hope that the SPECA countries will move ahead with the establishment of a SPECA Secretariat and the SPECA Fund. We do need to make SPECA an action platform, with tangible results. You can count on UNECE's support, and we stand ready to support the efforts of the participating countries in elevating the profile of SPECA – perhaps by initiating a higher-level engagement during next year's 25th anniversary session.

Now that all countries except Afghanistan participate actively in SPECA, we strongly hope that the decisions of the Governing Council to make SPECA a platform for subregional cooperation to achieve SDGs will be implemented successfully. We are ready to collaborate with the UN Resident Coordinators in a joint UN front to support this work. To support you, together with ESCAP and UNCTAD, we are organizing a side event on how your countries can best face the effects of the war in Ukraine.

SPECA countries have much higher chance to succeed on the path to sustainable development if they work together – connecting with each other and integrating with the European and Asian economies.

I wish you fruitful deliberations and success in your common endeavors.