

Intergovernmental Group of Experts on E-commerce and the Digital Economy

(5th session)

Geneva, 27-29 April 2022

Opening statement (check against delivery):

Dear Secretary General, Chair, Director, Excellencies, Colleagues,

On behalf of the EU and its Member States, allow me first to congratulate the Chair and the vice Chair for their election to lead us in this meeting. The EU and its Member States attach particular importance to the issue of digitalisation and its unquestionable potential to contribute to our joint development efforts.

In the current geopolitical context, a strengthened rule-based multilateralism with the UN Charter at its core is more relevant than ever. Therefore, we look forward to the panels put together by UNCTAD and to the sought intergovernmental experts' exchange that is to follow. We hope that our joint engagement and contributions on key issues for bridging the digital gap will bring us closer in our efforts to achieve the commitments of the 2030 Agenda.

The agreed focus for this session, notably the importance of digitalisation for development and for post-crisis recovery, has become even more relevant following the act of Russian military aggression against Ukraine. As the background note prepared by UNCTAD secretariat outlines, digitalisation has proven to be a critical factor that allowed for certain limitation of the effects of the pandemic. And the lack of relevant infrastructure is identified among the main factors that compromise the resilience and recovery potential of the impacted countries.

Indeed, Russian destruction of the critical connectivity infrastructure in Ukraine, as recognised by the WTSA resolution adopted in March, is having a momentously negative impact on the recovery prospects of Ukraine, with consequences going well beyond the Ukrainian borders.

The EU and its Member States, through our Global Gateway initiative, are committed to support developing countries in investing into the necessary connectivity infrastructure. This programme confirms our steadfast commitment to contribute to bridging the digital divide by mobilising up to €300 billion worth of quality investment, based on multilaterally agreed values and commitments. The Global Gateway demonstrates that it is a democratic, value-driven approach, which ultimately leads to sustainable investments, autonomous growth and decent job creation.

Yet ensuring connectivity is only a first step to narrowing the digital divide. To truly create value in the digital economy and ensure inclusiveness, in particular for SMEs, women and youth, effective and whole-of-the-government regulatory frameworks must be developed. Such frameworks need to facilitate innovation, protect consumers and personal data, and ensure a truly human rights-based approach.

UNCTAD's background note for this expert meeting, as well as its 2021 Digital Economy report, highlight the importance of data and data governance. As coined in 2006 by Clive Humby, "Data is the new oil. It's valuable, but if unrefined it cannot really be used". This remains valid. Yet data carries another similarity with oil. Just as the use of oil is damaging to the environment, so can improper data use accentuate inequalities, propagate misinformation and disinformation, and undermine democracies and basic human rights – as also outlined in the background note. These are real challenges, which the EU is trying to address through comprehensive regulations, such as the proposed Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we have seen how manipulation of or limiting access to data with clear intentions of disinformation, is undermining democratic principles, weakening multilateralism and fuelling war propaganda. But it is also putting at risk important scientific advancements with global implications in case data sharing is compromised.

Russian military aggression in Ukraine is a gross violation of international law and the principles of the UN Charter. With dreadful immediate consequences for the Ukrainian population, as witnessed by the atrocities committed by the Russian armed forces in Bucha and other places under Russian occupation in Ukraine. But also with far-reaching negative repercussions already observed globally through increased food and energy prices. Inclusive, fair and open digitalisation will not solve these issues – indeed, only Russia ceasing the hostilities and withdrawing its military from Ukraine can do that. But digitalisation can contribute to mitigate global impacts and allow for a faster recovery, bringing us all closer to achieving the commitments of the 2030 Agenda.

Thank you.