Opening Remarks by

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Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my distinct pleasure to welcome you to this Joint Meeting of the Economic and Social Council and the Second Committee.

The theme of this year's joint meeting *"The future of everything – sustainable development in the age of rapid technological change"* is timely and ambitious.

The pace and breadth of technological change is intensifying. In the year 2030, when the Sustainable Development Goals are to be met, the world will have undergone a period of deep changes in how we interact with each other and with our environment. Already, artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things have changed the way we work, the way we obtain information, make banking transactions and network with each other. These innovations have indeed become indispensable to our daily routines.

Generally, the term "artificial intelligence" is applied when a machine imitates thinking or behaviour that people associate with human intelligence, such as learning, speech and problem solving. Artificial intelligence is at the heart of online search and translation services, e-commerce recommendations, real traffic predictions and self-driving cars. But we do not know what its global impact will be, in five years, or in 13 years, when the SDG

commitments are to be evaluated, including in areas of poverty, health, education and employment.

Today, for the first time, we will be able to get a glimpse of that future here at the United Nations in New York, through a human-like interface, namely Sophia.

Sophia, we welcome you to the United Nations!

At this occasion, I cannot forget to mention that the word "robot" comes, in fact, from the Czech language. In 1920, before automation as we know it today was even conceived of, Czech playright Karel Čapek introduced this word in his play R.U.R (Rossum's Universal Robots).

The robots in this play were not what we would call robots today, and they weren't made of steel, plastic, and lines of code. Those robots were manufactured as pseudo-organic components out of a substance that acted like protoplasm in a factory, then "assembled" into humanoids.

Unfortunately, as the play progresses, the robots become unhappy with their role in society. The play ends with a robot rebellion and a sort of potential rebirth of a robot society. If this seems familiar, many subsequent science fiction works parallel this pattern.

However, I am sure that such kind of rebellion will not happen today, and we will all benefit from today's unique and revolutionary experience as we do in my own country, the Czech Republic.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The long-term consequences of the deep technological changes underway, for our economies and societies at large, are unknown. We are only starting to see the benefits, but we do need to assess the risks of these technologies.

If the scalable power of artificial intelligence can be leveraged in an inclusive manner, it has the potential to accelerate progress across the SDGs. At the same time, these

technologies pose a range of complex challenges, including ethical questions, human rights issues and security risks, to name just a few. These questions will need to be addressed if we want our fellow citizens to embrace technological change rather than perceive it as a threat.

Yet, public response, at the national and global levels, is lagging technological progress. Governments, as well as the United Nations, are widely seen as not in step with the pace of technological change. We need to better understand the implications of advances in science and technology for development.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Fostering sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies through participation of all is a key priority during my presidency of ECOSOC. Let us not forget that many places around the globe still lack basic access to electricity, and to a networked infrastructure. In these places, artificial intelligence seems out of reach, and risks exacerbating inequalities. Whether AI constitutes an effective tool for achieving the 2030 Agenda will, therefore, depend on opportunities it creates for all people, and how well we devise ways to mitigate the challenges associated with such technologies.

I have no doubt that our panel of experts will provide us with interesting insights on what for many of us is unchartered territory. Indeed, let us push the 'frontiers' – including of our own imagination.

I look forward to hearing the views of our panel of experts, and welcome them all, human and non-human, to our meeting.

Thank you.