



**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL PROGRAMME FOR THE ECONOMIES OF CENTRAL ASIA
(SPECA)**

FOURTEENTH SESSION OF THE SPECA GOVERNING COUNCIL

(Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, 21 November 2019)

ASHGABAT INITIATIVE

on

**Reducing barriers to trade and transport using United Nations legal instruments,
norms, standards and recommendations
while bolstering connectivity in the SPECA region**

The countries participating in the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA), represented by their delegates at the 2019 SPECA Economic Forum in Ashgabat, discussed and launched this Initiative on reducing barriers to trade and transport using United Nations international legal instruments, norms, standards, and best practice recommendations to strengthen the regional market and cross-border supply chains and to enhance connectivity of the SPECA countries with Europe and Asia, with the objective of attracting new investment, technologies and innovation in the SPECA region. These joint measures will contribute to sustainable and inclusive growth in the region and ultimately will support the efforts of the SPECA countries in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Special attention will be paid to reducing non-tariff barriers to trade, removal of physical and non-physical barriers to transport, and to fostering sustainable transport and trade facilitation.

Embarking on a path of inclusive and sustainable development calls for a change in the pattern of economic performance in the region from resource-based towards broad-based and export-oriented growth which can only be achieved through economic diversification and productive investment in new technologies. Fostering sustainable transport and trade facilitation by reducing non-tariff barriers to trade and physical and non-physical barriers to transport plays a key role in this broad policy agenda. Such measures ease the expansion of regional and global value chains and drive productivity, economic diversification, exports and economic growth, therefore enabling more people to benefit from increased economic activity.

The SPECA participating countries,

- recognizing the commonality of their interest in sustainable development and the need for progress towards sustainable and inclusive growth;
- acknowledging that the development of trade and transport, using United Nations legal instruments, norms, standards and recommendations, is essential for bolstering connectivity;
- noting that regional cooperation within the SPECA activities lays the ground for monitoring of transport and trade related SDGs in the SPECA countries;
- noting that non-tariff barriers to trade are a key impediment to a stronger regional market and cross-border supply chains that would attract investment, technology, and innovations;

- stressing the importance of sustainable transport development, and strengthening of international and regional connectivity, for the integration of the countries in the economies of Europe and Asia;
- noting the importance of border crossing facilitation and especially the efficient implementation of internationally recognized transit facilitation legal instruments such as the TIR Convention;
- noting the importance of regional cooperation and coordination in development of inland transport infrastructure and operations; and
- noting the importance of improved, simplified, harmonized and standardized procedures, documents and data exchange for international trade and transport,

launch this Initiative to cooperate on reducing behind and at the border non-tariff barriers to trade in goods and promotion of sustainable transport and enhancing transport connectivity. They assume that trade facilitation and efficiency of official controls should go hand-in-hand. Priority areas for the implementation of this initiative are outlined in Annex I below. Special attention is paid to streamlining border-crossing and documentary procedures in the SPECA region. Consequently, the delegates make the following:

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The participants in the 2019 SPECA Economic Forum recommend to:

1. Consider establishment of a SPECA Trust Fund to support activities within the framework of SPECA. They welcomed the proposal by the Government of Turkmenistan to establish such a SPECA Trust Fund. They asked the United Nations to develop draft concept and legal documents of the Fund;
2. Invite SPECA countries to further accede, if not yet done so, and efficiently implement the United Nations transport-related legal instruments listed in the Ashgabat Initiative to develop the full potential of the transport systems of the landlocked SPECA countries;
3. Scale up analytical and research work on smart and sustainable trade and transport connectivity among the SPECA countries, through such actions as preparing:
 - a. a SPECA study on non-tariff barriers to trade under the WG on Trade;
 - b. SPECA studies on enhancing the capacity of transport infrastructure to improve the connectivity and transit potential of the SPECA region and to enhance Euro-Asian transport connectivity;
 - c. a Guide on streamlining formalities and documentary procedures for international trade and transport, using the background work done by UNECE and ESCAP;
 - d. a SPECA Guide on transport statistics and indicators, as well as measuring sustainable transport connectivity; and
 - e. other studies as per relevant requests from the SPECA participating countries.
4. Expand capacity-building activities to enhance the capacity of SPECA countries to design, implement and monitor national and regional transport connectivity initiatives, through:
 - a. capacity-building workshops for SPECA countries on the efficient implementation of the eTIR International System and its connection with the National Customs Systems, including the ASYCUDA ICT;

- b. capacity-building workshops on a harmonized legal regime for international transport to help SPECA countries further accede to and effectively implement the United Nations transport-related legal instruments listed in the Ashgabat Initiative;
 - c. capacity development workshops in other relevant areas, including transport data collection and analysis, transport facilitation and use of new technologies and innovation in transport operations;
 - d. “trial runs” to assess the level of seamless connectivity along major transport corridors among SPECA countries based on findings and recommendations of the Eurasian Transport Links (EATL) and the Euro-Asian Transport Connectivity; and initiatives on the way forward to accelerate full operationalization; and
 - e. preparation of a SPECA action plan for the development of sustainable transport systems and regional connectivity by the SPECA Working Group on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity.
5. Enhance regional cooperation and public-private dialogue on trade and transport facilitation in the SPECA region:
- a. Improve the structure of cooperation through:
 - i. enhancing SPECA as a regional structure to coordinate trade facilitation reforms; and
 - ii. involving the private sector through establishing a SPECA dialogue platform (Business Council), using existing private sector regional cooperation structures (industry associations, civil society organizations and individual companies) in the areas of trade and transport facilitation, product quality and safety standards (e.g. the Partnership on Transport and Logistics in Central Asia).
 - b. Increase SPECA involvement in the implementation of conventions and agreements on trade and transport facilitation through:
 - i. a study on the implementation of international norms affecting regional cooperation in the SPECA region. In the framework of SPECA activities, organize:
 - a review of trade facilitation indicators and prioritization of trade facilitation measures that will have the highest effect in the region;
 - assessment of the implementation of relevant conventions and agreements;
 - technical assistance to the Governments of the SPECA participating countries for institutional reforms in trade facilitation, in collaboration with WTO, WCO, development partners and donors; and
 - review bilateral agreements, working with business and international experts, to facilitate SMEs access to transport services; and adapt existing bilateral agreements to the market realities to provide unimpeded bilateral and transit traffic based on mutual benefits.
 - ii. cross-border projects, using SPECA potential to develop and carry out joint projects introducing innovative tools to facilitate border-crossing procedures, e.g. when reconstructing border-crossing posts, with a view to harmonize both infrastructure and procedures. Such projects, in the framework of SPECA activities, may include:
 - a single model for checkpoints and procedures, regarding time parameters of control procedures on transit corridors;
 - introduction of "electronic queueing at the border" systems, based on advance information (AI) data submission; and

- systematic Time Release Studies (TRS) on a regional basis, so that the proposed Business Council could assess and monitor progress throughout the SPECA region.
- iii. fostering the implementation of framework standards of Customs clearance and controls adopted by the SPECA countries. Carry out independent assessments by the private sector (alternative reports on the implementation of trade policy), along with official reports of the countries' regulatory agencies.

PRIORITIES

For the implementation of this Initiative, the following priority areas were recognized:

- Promote smart connectivity for trade and transport as part of the joint efforts of the SPECA countries to promote inclusive and sustainable growth in the region. To this effect, simplify and streamline exchanges, using clear, free of charge, readily available and harmonized UN legal instruments, standards, recommendations, guides and other tools to promote seamless exchanges. Apply Information and Communication Technologies and innovative processes to improve interactions between people, companies, governments, their agencies and economies. Bring together public service needs with private sector innovation and financing capabilities. Set up connectivity infrastructure that meets the needs of citizens and businesses. Develop a SPECA strategy containing assessment of key regulatory barriers to operational transport connectivity, the use of smart technology for international transport, and indicators to measure progress of sustainable connectivity;
- Scale up analytical work to help increase the contribution of trade to sustainable development to provide policymakers with action-oriented recommendations, including for the reduction of non-tariff barriers to trade. Special emphasis will be accorded to identifying the interplay between non-tariff measures and structural transformation, and implications for the achievement for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
- Streamline documentary procedures, trade data exchange, Customs declaration procedures, regulatory certification and licensing procedures, with a view to simplify and streamline them. Carry out business process analyses to identify redundant requirements for documents and data. Establish projects for data harmonization among different documents and processes, to create an enabling environment for data reuse. Review compliance with UN standards to improve and fasten the procedures. Organize regular regional cooperation events on simplifying documentary procedures and exchange of experience;
- Harmonize efforts and solutions for paperless trade developed by SPECA countries at the bilateral and regional level with those developed in other countries and use internationally recognized solutions to reduce the cost and time needed for implementation of such trade facilitation instruments as interoperable Single Window for import and export clearance; facilitate SPECA countries' access to knowledge, technical assistance and capacity-building in this area;
- Promote regional cooperation and coordination in inland transport infrastructure development for an efficient transport system, which is a prerequisite for dynamic economic growth in the SPECA region. Design and develop this transport system in a sustainable manner and promote safe and environmentally friendly transport modes. Harmonize transport infrastructure standards for cross-border transport to avoid traffic disruptions and build infrastructure resilient to natural disasters. Focus on the identification and elimination of major bottlenecks along international transport routes to attract investments and innovation in all inland transport modes;

- Streamline cooperation on sustainable and efficient transport operations, seamless international transit and good connectivity to attract international flows along the inland Euro-Asian Transport corridors and boost national economies. Promote efficient intermodal transport to address challenges faced by the SPECA landlocked countries. Identify and deploy measures to reduce physical and non-physical barriers to improve competitiveness of inland transport operations;
- Promote innovation in transport to boost mobility, using digitalization and e-documents (e.g. eTIR, eCMR) especially in multimodal transport, and to improve efficiency and governance;
- SPECA countries implementing the TIR Convention should support the adoption of Annex 11 of the Convention which refers to eTIR and the digitalization of the TIR procedure and should actively participate to pilot tests with the aim to develop and finalize the eTIR International System;
- SPECA countries using UNCTAD ASYCUDA ICT systems should continue efforts in promoting regional connectivity, transit, transport and trade through extending the interoperability between Customs and other governmental agencies and electronic Customs data exchange with neighbouring countries in accordance with international standards and recommendations. This would include integration of ASYCUDA ICT with the eTIR International System creating an integrated and efficient transit solution;
- Transport is a key economic sector that provides access to markets and enables personal mobility. For the SPECA countries, better infrastructure connectivity is an important first step, and connecting services and facilitating the crossing of borders for both goods and people is crucial. The need for improving regional connectivity requires an underlying harmonized system of governance, based on a clear and comprehensive legal regime where efficient implementation of transport-related conventions and agreements could give significant support;
- In order to streamline and fasten procedures at border crossings, strengthen the cooperation of regulatory agencies internally and externally (among neighbouring countries), using relevant United Nations legal instruments, norms and recommendations such as the TIR Convention, the Harmonization Convention and other conventions;
- Promote regular consultations among regulatory agencies in neighbouring countries;
- Build the enabling conditions for freedom of transit, with such elements as comprehensive guarantees, separate green lanes at border-crossings, and the appointment of transit coordinators, who would cooperate on the regional level; and
- Promote further operationalization of the Euro-Asian Transport Links (EATL) and Euro-Asian Transport Connectivity in particular through the harmonization of technical standards along the Euro-Asian transport corridors, such as standards set in the UN legal instruments, standards on weights, dimensions and emissions by road vehicles, requirements for cross-border rail operations and standards for the operation of dry ports and intermodal facilities.

In order to ensure successful implementation of these objectives, the SPECA countries and the United Nations Regional Commissions are invited to strengthen their efforts to implement the following United Nations instruments:

Legal instruments:

- Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods under Cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention), as well as e-TIR;
- Convention on the Contract for the International Carriage of Goods by Road (CMR), as well as e-CMR;
- International Convention on the Harmonization of Frontier Controls of Goods (Harmonization Convention);
- Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific;
- United Nations transport-related legal instruments adopted by ESCAP Resolution 48/11 and the 2nd session of the SPECA Working Group on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity (see Annex II); and
- other relevant United Nations transport infrastructure agreements maintained by UNECE and ESCAP.

Standards and best practice recommendations:

- UN Layout Key for trade and transport documents (UNECE trade facilitation Recommendation 1), sectorial standards for forms and certificates;
- UN/CEFACT Recommendation 4 on National Trade Facilitation Bodies and Recommendation 40 on Consultations for Trade Facilitation;
- UN semantic standards for electronic exchange of information (UN/CEFACT Reference Data Models, Core Component Library and others);
- UN/CEFACT Recommendations 33 – 37 on the Single Window for export and import clearance; Recommendation 34 for data harmonization;
- UN/CEFACT Recommendation 42 on Trade and Transport Facilitation Monitoring Mechanism;
- UNNExT Business Process Analysis Guide to Simplify Trade Procedures;
- UNNExT Single Window Implementation Guides, including UNNExT Guide to Implementation of Electronic Messages for Cross-border paperless trade;
- The Code of Practice on the Safe Packing of Cargo Transport Units (CTU Code); and
- United Nations Transport Facilitation Tools and Models and relevant regional transport facilitation frameworks, such as the ESCAP Regional Strategic Framework for the Facilitation of International Road Transport and the ESCAP Regional Cooperation Framework for the Facilitation of International Railway Transport

Recognizing that many international organizations and development partners work on these issues, this Initiative should aim at introducing a more systematic approach, using United Nations legal norms, standards and recommendations and preparing a regional study on non-tariff barriers to trade.

The SPECA Fund, which is expected to be established following the 2019 SPECA Days, will support the implementation of this Initiative and contribute to the smooth running of the Programme.

In order to provide for the efficient implementation of the Initiative and for mobilization of additional resources, the countries are invited to efficiently transpose the above instruments into national legislation and development plans, and to ask development partners for assistance and inclusion of the measures and instruments listed in this Initiative in development projects.

For the actual implementation of this Initiative, the Governments of the SPECA participating countries, working with UNECE, ESCAP and the Resident Coordinators in the countries, shall prepare and agree on arrangements to support the implementation of this Initiative. In particular, the SPECA countries are invited to develop action plans for implementation in the framework of the SPECA Working Group on Trade and the SPECA Working Group on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity both providing institutional support for the implementation of this Initiative. They are also invited to nominate national focal points to these Working Groups on a sustained basis.

**Accession status to United Nations transport-related legal instruments listed in the Protocol of the
2nd session of SPECA Working Group on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity
(WG-STTC) as of 1 August 2019**

№	Agreements and Conventions	AFG	AZE	KAZ	KGZ	TJK	TKM	UZB
<i>Conventions recommended by ESCAP Resolution 48/11 and the SPECA WG-STTC</i>								
1	Convention on Road Traffic (1968)		X (2002)	X (1994)	X (2006)	X (1994)	X (1993)	X (1995)
2	Convention on Road Signs and Signals (1968)		X (2011)	X (1994)	X (2006)	X (1994)	X (1993)	X (1995)
3	Convention on the Contract for the International Carriage of Goods by Road (CMR, 1956)		X (2006)	X (1995)	X (1998)	X (1996)	X (1996)	X (1995)
4	Customs Convention on the Temporary Importation of Commercial Road Vehicles (1956)	X (1977)	X (2000)		X (1998)			X (1999)
5	Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods under Cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention) (1975)	X (1982)	X (1996)	X (1995)	X (1998)	X (1996)	X (1996)	X (1995)
6	International Convention on the Harmonization of Frontier Controls of Goods (1982)		X (2000)	X (2005)	X (1998)	X (2011)	X (2016)	X (1996)
7	Customs Convention on Containers (1972)		X (2005)	X (2005)	X (2007)			X (1996)
<i>Additional Agreements and Conventions recommended by the SPECA WG-STTC:</i>								
8	European Agreement on Main International traffic arteries (AGR) (1975)		X (1996)	X (1995)				
9	European Agreement on Main International Railway Lines (AGC) (1985)							
10	European Agreement on Important International Combined Transport Lines and Related Installations (AGTC) (1991)			X (2002)				
11	European Agreement supplementing the Convention on Road Traffic opened for signature at Vienna on 8 November 1968 (1971)			X (2011)				
12	European Agreement supplementing the Convention on Road Signs and Signals (1971)		X (2011)	X (2011)				
13	European Agreement concerning the Work of Crews of Vehicles Engaged in International Road Transport (AETR) (1970)		X (1996)	X (1995)		X (2011)	X (1996)	X (1998)
14	Customs Convention on the Temporary Importation of Private Road Vehicles (1954)							
15	European Agreement concerning the International Carriage of Dangerous Goods by Road (ADR) (1957)		X (2000)	X (2001)		X (2011)		
16	Agreement on the International Carriage of Perishable Foodstuffs and on the Special Equipment to be used for such Carriage (ATP) (1970)		X (2000)	X (1995)	X (2012)	X (2011)		X (1999)

**Accession status to United Nations ESCAP intergovernmental agreements on transport of
relevance to SPECA countries**

№	Agreements	AFG	AZE	KAZ	KGZ	TJK	TKM	UZB
1	Intergovernmental Agreement on the Asian Highway Network	X (2006)	X (2005)	X (2008)	X (2006)	X (2006)	X (2016)	X (2005)
2	Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian railway Network					X (2008)	X (2016)	X (2009)
3	Intergovernmental Agreement on Dry Ports	X (2016)		X (2016)		X (2015)	X (2016)	

Notes:

1. X - Final signature, ratification, accession;
 2. AFG – Afghanistan; AZE – Azerbaijan; KAZ – Kazakhstan; KGZ – Kyrgyzstan; TJK - Tajikistan; TKM – Turkmenistan; and UZB – Uzbekistan.
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