

# Regional Dialogue

## Strengthening transport connectivity in the SPECA region and beyond in the era of COVID-19

29 September 2020, 10.00 AM CET, Videoconference

Duration: max 4 hours

### Draft Concept Note

#### BACKGROUND

Lack of territorial access to the sea and high transport and transit costs impose constraints on the overall socio-economic development and trade competitiveness of the countries that are part of the UN Special Programme for the economies of Central Asia (SPECA), all of which are also included in the category of countries referred to by the United Nations as landlocked developing countries (LLDCs)<sup>1</sup>. LLDCs have to pay more than double what coastal countries incur as well as require about double the time for transit to export and import their goods. The high trade costs erode the competitiveness of the LLDCs as well as the trade volumes resulting in an enormous negative impact on their overall sustainable development.

The current situation in the world caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, has revealed a number of economic and social problems that require coordinated action by all countries and international organizations. Amongst others, consolidated approaches are required in such critical area as international transport and connectivity. Lockdowns, border closures and transport restrictions imposed by countries as part of measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic have caused serious disruptions of supply chains and citizen's mobility, which have exacerbated consequences for LLDCs, including the SPECA countries.

Enhancing connectivity and ensuring sustainable and efficient functioning of international transport corridors, at times of emergency situations, deserve heightened attention and actions more than ever now. The UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19 therefore stresses on the importance of improving connectivity and lowering transport and trade costs and border crossing waiting times. It is crucial to ensure the safety and security of transport and transit corridors in Central Asia, which for many centuries has served as a crossroads, bringing together East and West.

UNECE Inland Transport Committee (ITC) has been a framework for intergovernmental cooperation and concerted action to develop and facilitate international inland transport while improving its safety and environmental performance. Such cooperation is facilitated through 59 United Nations conventions, which provide an international legal framework for national and international road, rail, inland water and intermodal transport, including infrastructure networks, the transport of dangerous goods, and the construction and inspection of road motor vehicles. SPECA countries have ratified number of UN conventions (*status of ratifications is provided in table 1 in the annex*) and benefited from their implementation, thus have further opportunity to deploy international transport-related regulations and practices for better connectivity in the region. Recognizing the role of UN legal instruments in enhancing transport connectivity, in 2019 SPECA countries launched the Ashgabat initiative on reducing barriers to trade and transport using United Nations international legal

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<sup>1</sup> <http://unohrlls.org/en/about-lllcs/country-profiles-2/>

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, in particular.

ESCAP is the leading inter-governmental platform for regional cooperation in Asia and the Pacific, working closely with its member States on regional transport connectivity, including the infrastructure and operational connectivity issues under the region-wide intergovernmental agreements on the Asian Highway network, the Trans-Asian Railway network and Dry Ports (*status of ratifications is provided in table 2 in the annex*). By supporting the development of a regional intermodal network, ESCAP works to strengthen connectivity, optimize the use of existing infrastructure and increase the level of integration between the different transport modes. In doing so, ESCAP promotes the unhindered and safe movement of vehicles, goods and people across borders and through countries of the region through the establishment of regional facilitation frameworks, assistance in formulating and implementing facilitation agreements, development of models and standards, provision of facilitation tools and the harmonization of documentation and procedures. Together with UNECE and UNCTAD, ESCAP is co-leading the implementation of the UN rapid response project on Transport and trade connectivity in the age of pandemics: UN solutions for contactless, seamless and collaborative transport and trade and the results and opportunities arising from the project's activities will be shared with the SPECA countries during the policy dialogue.

The Vienna Programme of Action (VPoA) for Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) for the Decade 2014-2024 reiterates the importance of physical transport infrastructure in reducing trade costs and stresses the importance of completion of missing links and facilitating regional connectivity. Amongst the key objectives of the Vienna Programme of Action for the LLDCs is to develop adequate transit transport infrastructure networks, strengthen regional integration, simplify and harmonize rules and regulations. Ministerial Conference of LLDCs had been planned to be held in Ashgabat in March 2020 to discuss these issues and elaborate a coordinated course of action, however, it was postponed due to the pandemic.

Turkmenistan has been playing significant role in promoting international cooperation on transport and connectivity issues. UN General Assembly resolutions on international cooperation in the field of transport connectivity were adopted at the initiative of Turkmenistan in 2014, 2015 and 2017, as well as the outcome documents of the Global Conference on Sustainable Transport (Ashgabat statement, November 2016), International High-level conference on the role of transport and transit corridors in ensuring international cooperation, stability and sustainable development (Ashgabat Declaration, September 2014). Most recently, Turkmenistan has initiated a draft Resolution of the 74<sup>th</sup> session of the GA on “*Strengthening the links between all modes of transport to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic*”.

UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) supports the countries in the region to develop secure and efficient cross-border movement through delivering an integrated approach on border management, establishment of border liaison offices (BLO), port control units (PCU) and interagency mobile groups. Up to date, UNODC assisted in establishing 15 BLOs in Central Asia geographically remote and potentially vulnerable checkpoints with further plans to increase the numbers of BLOs, enhance regional information and communication systems and setting up Situation Centers. Under the UNODC-WCO Global Container Control Programme, which aims at assisting the countries to create sustainable enforcement structures to minimize the risk of shipping containers being exploited for illicit trafficking, 13 PCUs have been established, fully equipped and operationally supported.

The proposed Regional Dialogue (via videoconference) represents a consistent follow-up on global and regional initiatives on transport and connectivity, including those initiated by Turkmenistan, and will contribute to preparations of the LLDC ministerial conference on transport connectivity as well as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Global Conference on transport. Furthermore, the Dialogue should enable SPECA countries to build agreement and consensus on how to respond to, address lessons learned and built resilience of transport system to potential further spread of COVID-19 and any future pandemics. It is organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe in cooperation with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for the Asia and Pacific, the UN Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (OHRLLS) and the United Nations Resident Coordinator Offices in SPECA countries.

#### **OBJECTIVE, STRUCTURE AND GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE OF THE EVENT**

The overall objective of the *Regional Dialogue “Strengthening transport connectivity in the SPECA region and beyond in the era of COVID-19”* is to facilitate an inclusive discussion and coordinate actions and plans on harmonization of international transport procedures to enhance connectivity in the SPECA region and beyond, especially at times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Discussions will be guided by the UN transport-related legal framework, Outcome of the 1<sup>st</sup> International Conference on sustainable transport, the Vienna Programme of Action for LLDCs, as well as the UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19 pandemic. The event will geographically cover countries that are part of the SPECA Programme, namely Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and beyond, including Georgia and Turkey, and can be extended to other countries. The regional dialogues more specifically will:

- Facilitate the exchange of information on progress and challenges faced by the participating countries in promoting development of regional transport system, and agree on the future steps to enhance regional connectivity and maintain undisrupted supply-chains particularly in the era of COVID-19 pandemic;
- Provide the platform to discuss the benefits of joining the UN transport-related conventions for enhancing the harmonization of regulations, use of digital solutions such e-TIRs, enhancing connectivity and efficiency, removing non-physical barriers to transport, including at times of emergencies like COVID-19 pandemic;
- Provide update and share experiences in developing multimodal transport systems (especially railways), completing missing infrastructure links connecting SPECA countries and regional networks, also touching upon challenges and opportunities.
- Feed into the preparation of the forthcoming expert and high-level policy meetings of SPECA countries and, notably, the SPECA Thematic Working Groups on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity.
- Provide a platform to discuss the issues of safety and security of trade and transit corridors.

The event will bring together representatives from the ministries of transport, foreign affairs, border, customs services, as well as the representatives of road transport, railroad companies from the participating countries, UNECE, UNESCAP, OHRLLS, , UNODC, MDBs, and UN Offices in participating countries.

It is expected that the Regional Dialogue will result in enhancing the common understanding of the importance of regional connectivity, especially to mitigate challenges imposed by COVID-19. and formulating/strengthening follow-up actions related to improving transport and trade connectivity and health situation in SPECA countries stipulated in the Ashgabat initiative. Furthermore, the Dialogue will raise awareness on potential benefits of SPECA Fund proposed by the Ashgabat Initiative.

Due to travel restrictions and social distancing policies in place to contain the COVID-19 pandemic around the world, the regional dialogue will be held via videoconference and the duration will be limited to four hours.

## **SUBSTANTIVE SEGMENTS**

### **Session 1: Policies and regulations for transport connectivity and Legal framework for enhanced international transport**

This session will start with the interventions where UNECE, UNESCAP and OHRLLS will present benefits from the efficient implementation of the UN transport-related legal instruments and policies, institutions and regulations for sustainable transport connectivity. In the same session ministers of transport of participating countries will share experiences and their efforts aimed at minimizing procedures/waiting times at the borders and along international corridors, improving transport services, optimizing environmental protection, simplifying/ licensing or permits, insurance, visas, and other procedures concerning international transport. Interventions should highlight any additional challenges in transport connectivity triggered by COVID-19 pandemic and propose best practices and recommendations on addressing them. The meeting will discuss achievements on these issues, challenges, opportunities and suggest recommendations for enhanced international transport.

#### **Possible questions for discussion:**

- *What have been the key achievements in improving international transport and connectivity for the SPECA countries in last five years?*
- *What have been the major transport challenges, in particular in the condition of COVID-19 pandemic, and how can these be addressed?*
- *What are the best practices and lessons learned including on cross-border cooperation particularly in establishment of legal framework and digital solutions for cross-border facilitation?*

Format: Presentations followed by Q&A

Tentative/suggested keynote speakers: Transport Ministers of SPECA countries; UNECE on the benefits of joining the UN transport-related conventions for harmonization of regulations and practices in the area of international transport for enhanced connectivity in the region; UNESCAP on freight transport and COVID-19 in North and Central Asia, OHRLLS on Vienna Programme of Action activities.

### **Session 2. Promotion of regional connectivity, transport corridors and integrated multimodal transport systems**

Transport is a key ingredient of sustainable development. Effective, efficient, multimodal transport systems are becoming increasingly important for enhancing connectivity, promoting access to markets and enabling countries to benefit from global/regional trade.

Therefore, this session will share experiences and best practices in developing multimodal transport systems, completing missing infrastructure links connecting SPECA countries within regional networks and developing and operationalizing all aspects of corridors in order to enhance connectivity and economic development. Participants will discuss progress, challenges, opportunities and identify recommendations.

**Possible questions for discussion:**

- *What are some best practices and lessons learned from the development and management of international transport corridors?*
- *What are the main challenges in development and operationalization of multi-modal corridors and bringing all modes of transport together?*
- *What are some examples of the benefits of promoting integrated multi-modal transport systems?*
- *What are the best practices in cross-border communication and intelligence-sharing to increase safety and security of international transport corridors and trade?*

Format: Presentations followed by Q&A

Tentative/suggested keynote speakers: Representatives of MDBs, UNODC on border control initiatives, UNECE, UNESCAP and selected countries, which made steps to improve efficiency of transport corridors.

## Annex I

**Table 1** Status of ratifications of UN transport-related legal instruments in SPECA countries

Nº	UN Agreements and Conventions	Type	AFG	AZE	KAZ	KGZ	TJK	TKM	UZB
1	European Road Network (AGR), 1975	I		X 1996	X 1995				
2	European Combined Transport Network (AGTC), 1991				X 2002				
3	Road Traffic, 1968	RT & RS		X 2002	X 1994	X 2006	X 1994	X 1993	X 1995
4	Road Signs and Signals, 1968			X 2011	X 1994	X 2006	X 1994	X 1993	X 1995
5	Supplementing 1968 Convention Road Traffic, 1971				X 2011				
6	Supplementing 1968 Convention Road Signs & Signals, 1971			X 2011	X 2011				
7	Protocol Road Markings, 1973			X 2011	X 2011				
11	Work of Crews International Road Transport (AETR), 1970			X 1996	X 1995		X 2011	X 1996	X 1998
8	Vehicles Regulations, 1958		V		X 2002	X 2010			
9	Technical Inspection of Vehicles, 1997				X 2011				
10	Global Vehicles Regulations, 1998			X 2002	X 2011		X 2011		X 2018
12	Contract for the International Carriage of Goods by Road (CMR), 1956	O		X 2006	X 1995	X 1998	X 1996	X 1996	X 1995
13	Additional Protocol to CMR, (e-CMR) 2008						X 2019		
14	Collision Inland Navigation, 1960	IN			X 2003				
15	TIR Convention, 1959	BC	X 1971						
16	TIR Convention, 1975		X 1982	X 1996	X 1995	X 1998	X 1996	X 1996	X 1995
17	Temporary Importation of Commercial Road Vehicles, 1956		X 1977	X 2000		X 1998			X 1999
18	Customs Container Convention, 1972			X 2005	X 2005	X 2007			X 1996
19	Harmonization of Frontier Controls of Goods, 1982			X 2000	X 2005	X 1998	X 2011	X 2016	X 1996
20	Dangerous Goods by Road (ADR), 1957	DG		X 2000	X 2001		X 2011		X 2020
21	Perishable Foodstuffs (ATP), 1970			X 2000	X 1995	X 2012	X 2011		X 1999

\* Status at 01.04.2020

**Notes:**

I – Infrastructure Networks

RT & RS – Road Traffic and Road Safety

V – Vehicles

O – Other Legal Instruments Related to Road Transport

IN – Inland Navigation

BC – Border Crossing Facilitation

DG – Dangerous Goods and Special Cargoes

X = Ratification, accession, definite signature

AFG – Afghanistan, AZE – Azerbaijan, KAZ – Kazakhstan, KRG – Kyrgyzstan,

TJK – Tajikistan, TKM – Turkmenistan, UZB – Uzbekistan

**Table 2** Accession status to United Nations ESCAP's intergovernmental agreements on transport of relevance to SPECA countries.

<b>№</b>	<b>Agreements</b>	<b>AFG</b>	<b>AZE</b>	<b>KAZ</b>	<b>KGZ</b>	<b>TJK</b>	<b>TKM</b>	<b>UZB</b>
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:**

*X = Ratification, accession, definite signature*

*AFG – Afghanistan, AZE – Azerbaijan, KAZ – Kazakhstan, KRG – Kyrgyzstan, TJK – Tajikistan, TKM – Turkmenistan, UZB – Uzbekistan*