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## Economic Commission for Europe

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### Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business

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Matters arising since the twenty-sixth session

## Report from United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Regional Advisor

Submitted by the secretariat for information

### *Summary*

This report provides information on activities of the Regional Advisor in support of implementing trade facilitation and the UN/CEFACT standards, notably in the countries with economies in transition in 2020-2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. His work in this period focused on two areas. First, he assisted countries to implement those measures of the World Trade Organization's Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) in which UNECE and UN/CEFACT have a comparative advantage (WTO TFA articles 10.1, 10.3, 10.4, and 23.2), including organizing workshops and studies for the countries participating in the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA). Second, the activities of the Regional Advisor boosted the implementation of UN/CEFACT semantic standards and Reference Data Models, with the aim of limiting the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on connectivity, trade, and transport. The deliverables of a United Nations Development Account multiagency project dedicated to this task included a Guide for National Trade Facilitation Bodies on How to Use UN/CEFACT Standards and Tools in the Age of COVID-19; and a package of UN/CEFACT-aligned standards for electronic document equivalents accompanying goods in multimodal transport. The project includes support for the implementation of existing standards, as well as filling in gaps in the package of standards and further implementation.

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## I. Introduction

1. The Regional Advisor's work is based on the mandate of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) to set standards for trade facilitation and e-business. It aims at improving cooperation and integration in the UNECE region and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Regional Advisor helps the seventeen UNECE programme countries<sup>1</sup> to facilitate and develop their trade capacity by implementing UN/CEFACT standards and trade facilitation recommendations. In 2020-2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Regional Advisor's work included two areas related to UN/CEFACT:

- Thirteen transition economies received assistance to implement measures of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA), in which UNECE and UN/CEFACT have a comparative advantage (WTO articles 10.1, 10.3, 10.4, and 23.2) due to their normative instruments. This is reflected in the improved categorization of measures in the countries' notifications to the WTO<sup>2</sup>. The Regional Advisor thus contributed to the achievement of SDG 17.10. Specifically, he provided support to the countries participating in the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA)<sup>3</sup> to implement the Ashgabat Initiative on Reducing barriers to trade and transport<sup>4</sup>; the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy<sup>5</sup>; and to limiting the negative effects of non-tariff barriers to trade in times of pandemic.
- The activities of the Regional Advisor boosted the implementation of UN/CEFACT semantic standards and reference data models, notably to limit the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on connectivity, trade, and transport.

2. In this sense, the Regional Advisor continued to manage projects and activities supporting countries in the implementation of the UNECE and UN/CEFACT trade facilitation recommendations and standards.

3. Activities of the Regional Advisor during the last years have contributed to two major developments in 2020:

- Activities in support of Turkmenistan since 2016 helped the country obtain in July 2020 observer status with the WTO (a step towards achieving SDG 17.10); and
- On 28 October 2020 the European Commissioners agreed on a new proposal for European Union single window legislation.<sup>6</sup> The UNECE Regional Advisor had contributed for two years to the drafting of this legislation upon invitation by the Directorate General Taxation and Customs Union (DG TAXUD).

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<sup>1</sup> The seventeen UNECE programme countries are those UNECE member States where there is a United Nations assistance programme. Currently, these include Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

<sup>2</sup> At the WTO trade facilitation database <https://tfadatabase.org/members> one can view the latest notifications of the countries (typically at the end of each country's page, to view data on the dynamics of implementation of the TFA measures in the relevant countries. The UNECE advisory services helped Kazakhstan and Ukraine, as well as Azerbaijan, Belarus and Uzbekistan (three WTO accession countries) assess their readiness and plan the implementation of the TFA measures. All seventeen programme countries received assistance for implementing the TFA measures in which UNECE has competitive advantage (notably art. 23.2, 10.1, 10.3, and 10.4). Kazakhstan, for example, notified to the WTO Secretariat improvement in the implementation in July-August 2019: it moved three measures, on which there had been collaboration with the Regional Advisor (enquiry points, use of international standards and Single Window) from category C to category B and clarified that practically all measures will be fulfilled by 22 February 2022. On 15 July and 3 December 2020, Kyrgyzstan notified URLs with information on the implementation of several measures, for some of which they received assistance from UNECE. On 7 July 2020, Tajikistan notified URLs of ministries and agencies responsible for the implementation of most TFA measures, as well as progress in the implementation of four measures, including the Single Window, on which they have received assistance from UNECE. Unfortunately, Afghanistan notified in May 2020 regress in its readiness to implement three Customs-related measures, yet UNECE has little leverage to affect that development.

<sup>3</sup> [www.unece.org/speca](http://www.unece.org/speca)

<sup>4</sup> [https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session14/IV\\_AHGABAT\\_INITIATIVE\\_English.pdf](https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session14/IV_AHGABAT_INITIATIVE_English.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session14/SPECA\\_Trade\\_Facilitation\\_Strategy\\_English.pdf](https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session14/SPECA_Trade_Facilitation_Strategy_English.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [201028\\_commission\\_proposal\\_single\\_window.pdf](https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session14/SPECA_Trade_Facilitation_Strategy_English.pdf) (europa.eu)

## II. Assisting the transition economies with trade facilitation and implementing the TFA

4. Two training events organized by the Regional Advisor, in cooperation with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and other partners, boosted the capacity of 210 experts from the SPECA countries (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) to implement trade facilitation. First, a training event, originally planned to be held in Dushanbe, was held online on 6-7 July 2020<sup>7</sup>. This event was organized with Tajikistan, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and GIZ. It encouraged the establishment of national trade facilitation committees (NTFCs) in the SPECA countries, notably in Azerbaijan (which requested and received further assistance from the Regional Advisor) and Uzbekistan. It started work on harmonizing border-crossing procedures under the SPECA Working Group on Trade. Second, a seminar on 3-4 November 2020 for NTFCs in the SPECA subregion laid the foundations for regional cooperation of NTFCs and produced a list of recommendations for action.

5. Two working papers of the SPECA Working Group on Trade were drafted and published in 2020. Respective agencies in the SPECA countries currently continue to review the two papers, including their recommendations, with a view to providing a revised version for the next meeting of the Working Group. The first is a working paper on harmonizing border-crossing procedures in the SPECA countries<sup>8</sup>, which contains recommendations for action to the SPECA countries. The second is a study on the impact of COVID-19-induced non-tariff measures (NTMs)<sup>9</sup>. It provides guidance to countries on how to prevent NTMs imposed due to the pandemic from becoming barriers to trade.

6. In 2020, upon request from the Government of Uzbekistan, the Regional Advisor started a project on self-assessment of Uzbekistan's readiness to implement the WTO TFA with two seminars and an internal survey. The project will finish later in 2021 and is expected to help with the accession of Uzbekistan to WTO and with the achievement of SDG 17.10.

## III. Data sharing in the age of COVID-19

7. The Regional Advisor took up new tasks in the rapid response to the challenges of COVID-19, notably managing a segment of the United Nations Development Account (UNDA) project "Transport and Trade Connectivity in the Age of Pandemic: United Nations solutions for contactless, seamless and collaborative transport and trade"<sup>10</sup>. The segment led by the UNECE Economic Cooperation and Trade Division (ECTD) has the following deliverables:

- A Guide for National Trade Facilitation Bodies on How to Use UN/CEFACT Standards and Tools<sup>11</sup> in the age of COVID-19 is published and intended for distribution among National Trade Facilitation Bodies (NTFBs) in 2021;
- Experts working under the UNDA COVID-19 project developed a package of standards for electronic document equivalents accompanying goods in multimodal transport. The Regional Advisor contributed to the advancement and rollout of this package. Under this project the following activities have taken (or continue to take) place:
  - Experts developed new standards for eight new logistics and other documents (including multimodal waybill, packing list and other documents) to advance pilot implementation;

<sup>7</sup> <https://unece.org/trade/events/seminar-trade-facilitation-times-covid-19>

<sup>8</sup> Available at [https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/trade/workshop/2020\\_Nov\\_SPECAWG/Overview\\_BorderCrossings\\_Eng.pdf](https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/trade/workshop/2020_Nov_SPECAWG/Overview_BorderCrossings_Eng.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Available at [https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/trade/workshop/2020\\_Nov\\_SPECAWG/COVID-ConsolidatedReport\\_Eng.pdf](https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/trade/workshop/2020_Nov_SPECAWG/COVID-ConsolidatedReport_Eng.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> For more information, see the UNDA COVID-19 Trade and Transport Project website: <https://www.unttc.org>.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://unttc.org/stream/national-tf-committees-ece>

- They continue filling in gaps in the package of standards for documents accompanying goods transported by different modes of transport. By February 2021, these include the following: maritime waybill; inland water transport documents<sup>12</sup>; railway consignment notes<sup>13</sup>; invoice for customs; and Certificate of Origin<sup>14</sup>;
  - Experts from Belarus and Ukraine have started implementing existing UN/CEFACT standards for electronic transport document equivalents<sup>15</sup> - notably for the electronic road consignment note (eCMR) under the Convention on the Contract for the International Carriage of Goods by Road (CMR). Experts are also working on the possible use of the eCERT standard to implement electronic phytosanitary certificates in Belarus and Ukraine;
  - The Regional Advisor has engaged with the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) for further cooperation in the area of data and document exchange for cargo transport by air; and
  - The first pilot implementation cases involve (1) the development of an electronic version of the Bill of Lading of the International Federation of Freight Forwarders' Associations (FIATA), aligned with the UN/CEFACT reference data models, and (2) contributions to the Black Sea/Baltic Sea digital corridor and a Dnieper/Danube pilot implementation.
- Activities on data sharing and alignment with the Multi-Modal Transport Reference Data Model (MMT-RDM) have taken place:
    - At the Tenth International Seminar on Trade and Transport Facilitation: Multimodal Transport Data Exchange, Digital Transport Corridors, and Trade Facilitation<sup>16</sup>, organized by the UNECE (27-29 April 2020), business community and government representatives from Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine demonstrated interest in working on multimodal data exchange in the Black Sea/Baltic Sea corridor and starting a pilot implementation. The seminar issued policy recommendations to that effect. It initiated collaboration with FIATA, freight forwarders in Ukraine, and UN/CEFACT experts, to develop an electronic equivalent of the FIATA multimodal Bill of Lading aligned with the UN/CEFACT standards;
    - At the brainstorming session on data harmonization and modelling using UN/CEFACT standards<sup>17</sup>, organized by the UNECE and the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) on 18 June 2020, experts from UNECE, EEC, and UN/CEFACT agreed to cooperate and use the window of opportunity created by COVID-19 to harmonize standards for data exchange; and
    - At the regional seminar for the Western Balkans on data sharing and single window implementation<sup>18</sup> (27-28 October 2020) experts from UNECE, UN/CEFACT, the Western Balkan countries' single window projects, the World Bank, the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and others issued a set of recommendations on how to use UN/CEFACT semantic standards and reference data models in their single window projects.
8. Work on the UNDA COVID-19 project has strengthened collaboration with the European Commission, EEC, railway, air, and other sectorial organizations to advance the digitalization of multimodal transport data and document exchange with reference to the

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<sup>12</sup> Experts are exploring the possibility of developing standards for a “Bill of Lading” for inland water transport or an electronic equivalent to the consignment note under the Budapest Convention on the Contract for the Carriage of Goods by Inland Waterway (CMNI).

<sup>13</sup> Experts are working on standards aligned with the UN/CEFACT Multi-Modal Transport Reference Data Model for the CIM/SMGS and SMGS railway consignment notes.

<sup>14</sup> See <https://unttc.org/stream/electronic-trade-and-transport-documents-and-data>.

<sup>15</sup> For a streamlined list of UN/CEFACT standards, see [www.unece.org/unecefact/mainstandards.html](http://www.unece.org/unecefact/mainstandards.html).

<sup>16</sup> <https://unece.org/trade/events/tenth-international-seminar-trade-and-transport-facilitation-multimodal-transport-data>

<sup>17</sup> <https://unece.org/trade/events/data-harmonization-and-modelling-using-unecefact-standards-and-reference-data-models>

<sup>18</sup> <https://unece.org/trade/events/third-technical-cooperation-workshop-western-balkans-single-window-and-data-sharing>

UN/CEFACT standards. Letters from the European Commission<sup>19</sup> and ICAO<sup>20</sup> attest to their support for this initiative and for the UNDA COVID-19 project.

9. Due to restrictions caused by COVID-19, capacity-building seminars and subregional cooperation events have taken place online, and this will be the case for the foreseeable future. Information sessions on the objectives and results of the UNDA COVID-19 project will take place for the UNECE Sustainable Transport Division, the five United Nations Regional Commissions and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)—which are the agencies participating in the UNDA COVID-19 connectivity project—as well as the European Commission and other partners.

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<sup>19</sup> The acting Director General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) of the European Commission sent a letter of support on 4 December 2020, coordinated with the Directorates General on Taxation and the Customs Union (DG TAXUD) and the Directorate General on Mobility and Transport (DG MOVE).

<sup>20</sup> Letter sent on 30 December 2020 by the Secretary-General of ICAO Ms. Fang Liu.