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Matters arising since the twenty-fifth session

Report from UNECE Regional Advisor

Note by the Secretariat

Summary

This is the report of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Regional Adviser for Trade. The Regional Adviser participates in national capacity-building activities and the implementation of technical cooperation projects. His activities facilitate the sharing of experience and good practices among the UNECE membership. This document provides a report of his activities since the twenty-fifth session.

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I. Introduction

1. 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, the Regional Adviser assists economies in transition¹ to facilitate and develop their trade through the implementation of UN/CEFACT standards, recommendations and other tools. In 2019 and 2020, the Regional Adviser's work has been concentrated in three areas related to UN/CEFACT: (1) assist in the implementation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA), contribute to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17.10: promotion of a universal, rules-based trading system; (2) promote the implementation of UN/CEFACT standards and reference data models (RDMs) for data sharing and modelling; and (3) support the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA). On this basis, the Regional Adviser has continued to manage projects and activities supporting countries in the implementation of UNECE and UN/CEFACT trade facilitation recommendations and standards.

II. Assistance for the implementation of the WTO TFA

2. In 2019, Belarus (which is in the process of accession to the WTO) received assistance to assess its readiness to implement the TFA. A comprehensive report on its readiness and recommendations on what to concentrate on were prepared and discussed at a validation seminar in Minsk on 14 and 15 August 2019. It is likely that Belarus will not be given a transition period to implement the TFA; it will therefore need to implement all TFA measures before joining the WTO. A request to organize a seminar on the functioning of National Trade Facilitation Committees (NTFCs) in Belarus is being considered.

3. Uzbekistan has also activated its process for WTO accession and TFA implementation; a project to determine Uzbekistan's TFA readiness has started with a seminar on 16, 17 and 20 March 2020 (carried out through teleconferencing due to the COVID-19 quarantine). These activities support SDG 17.10.

4. Following up on TFA readiness assessments and overall support for the transition economies (especially the SPECA countries), the Regional Adviser organized two seminars, partly supported by a United Nations Development Account (UNDA) project - one in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan (20-22 May 2019) for the SPECA countries; and one in Skopje, North Macedonia (4 and 5 Sept 2019) for the Western Balkans. The seminars focused on four TFA items in which the UNECE and UN/CEFACT have a comparative advantage and tools for implementation: NTFCs (art. 23.2); streamlining documentary procedures (art. 10.1); use of international standards (art. 10.3); and Single Window systems (art.10.4). UN/CEFACT Recommendation No. 42: National Trade and Transport Facilitation Monitoring Mechanisms was also covered. The seminars helped NTFC members and regulatory bodies to increase their understanding of these four TFA items and their implementation. The seminar in Nur-Sultan was organized in cooperation with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and GIZ. Kazakhstan and Northern Macedonia expressed interest in working with the Regional Adviser and other partners on developing a national Trade and Transport Facilitation Monitoring Mechanism. Within the implementation of the UNDA T11 project, two business process analyses (BPAs) on exports of grain were carried out: from Kazakhstan to Azerbaijan (as a follow up to a BPA in 2014 on the same business process, to monitor progress); and on the export of wheat from Ukraine. Both reports were discussed at

¹ The Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation (RPTC) countries. See <https://www.unece.org/operact/opera/rptc.html>.

international seminars organized by the UNECE and are a key element in these countries' plans to monitor their progress in trade facilitation implementation.

III. Data sharing

5. In 2019, two consultants carried out individual, practical studies to assist transition economies in the use of international standards for data harmonization and modelling: one on data modelling, to be used in the Azerbaijani Single Window; and one on the alignment of data in several transport documents to the UN/CEFACT Multimodal Transport RDM, to create a standard data set for data exchange (and to create electronic documents) for multimodal transport along corridors (e.g. the Odessa-Klaipeda "Viking" corridor UA-BY-LI and the GUAM corridor MD-UA-GE-AZ).

6. The results of the Azeri project were presented at several events and there are plans to advance that work. Work on the data alignment project led to the creation of a data set covering several transport documents (to be used in the Viking corridor); this was done in collaboration with the trade facilitation community in Ukraine. Practical results are expected soon. The 2020 UNECE seminar in Odessa, Ukraine, (26 May 2020) will be focused on the results of this project for trade facilitation in the country and the region.

7. The concept of data alignment to the UN/CEFACT semantic standards and RDMs for seamless data sharing in international trade and transport received a boost at a brainstorming session between the UNECE and the Eurasian Economic Commission in April 2019; at the annual UNECE seminar in Odessa in May 2019; and the second technical cooperation workshop for the Western Balkans "Single Window and Data Sharing in the Western Balkans. Implementing Specific Trade Facilitation Measures", 4 and 5 September 2019 (organized with the World Bank and the European Commission, with the active participation of the UN/CEFACT Chair).

IV. SPECA: Ashgabat Initiative (November 2019) on using United Nations legal instruments, standards and recommendations for trade and transport facilitation to reduce barriers to trade in the region and contribute to sustainable growth

8. The annual events of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) took place in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan on 18-21 November 2019, and focused on using United Nations tools for trade and transport facilitation to reduce barriers to trade in the region and to contribute to sustainable growth. The events were a definite success. All countries were represented at the ministerial level (Ministers and Vice Ministers). Key decisions were made, and documents were adopted to move SPECA into its third decade (SPECA-3). At one of these events—the 2019 SPECA Economic Forum on Connectivity: Sustainable Transport and Trade Facilitation in the SPECA Subregion (20 and 21 November 2019) - topics such as cooperation among NTFCs, streamlining formalities and documentary procedures, implementation of international trade facilitation standards, and Single Window systems were discussed.

9. The concluding document of the SPECA Forum², and background studies and presentations from the Economic Forum can be found at <https://www.unece.org/index.php?id=52512>. The SPECA Governing Council decisions from 21 November 2019 can be found at <https://www.unece.org/index.php?id=52447>. The Governing Council also adopted new Terms of Reference for SPECA and its working groups, as well as SPECA regional strategies for trade facilitation and innovation for the SDGs, principles for sustainable trade, and a concept for a regional study on reducing non-tariff barriers to trade. Several background documents on the transition to sustainable growth in the region and on the current situation of trade and transport facilitation in the region were presented at the Economic Forum. The focus of the Regional Adviser for 2020 and beyond will be to work on the implementation of the Ashgabat Initiative and other strategic documents.

10. These documents (most also available Russian), and the documents of the SPECA working groups on trade and sustainable transport, can be found at the relevant webpages of SPECA:

- <https://www.unece.org/speca/welcome.html>
- <https://www.unece.org/speca/about-speca/terms-of-reference-of-speca.html>
- <https://www.unece.org/tradewelcome/trademeetings/speca-wg-on-trade/sessions/2019/fourteenth-session-of-the-speca-working-group-on-trade/doc.html> (Working Group on Trade)
- https://www.unece.org/trans/main/speca/speca_24.html (Working Group on Sustainable Transport)

11. At the SPECA Days, a new edition of the English-Russian-Chinese Glossary of trade facilitation terms was launched. The innovative electronic version of this publication, which defines the semantics of trade and trade facilitation in three languages used in Eurasia, can be found at: https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/trade/Publications/ECE_TRADE_377Rev.2_01.pdf

12. The Regional Advisor will be working with partners on action plans to implement the Ashgabat Initiative, studies on non-tariff barriers to trade in the SPECA subregion, practical guides for trade and transport facilitation, etc. UN/CEFACT experts willing to cooperate are welcome.

² 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.