



United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

SPECA meeting on cooperation in the WTO process

14 June 2022, 15:00-17:00

Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland

Building H, Room H-207, H-208

Report (Draft)

Brief summary:

The meeting took place during the WTO MC12 in Geneva, which was importantly co-chaired by Kazakhstan. The participants of the meeting (see the participants list in the annex) stressed the importance of the regional SPECA work on trade issues. This work has been critical in supporting SPECA countries integration into the global economy. The following have been identified as priority areas for the future work: trade and multimodal transport connectivity, digitalization, trade facilitation, sustainable trade, and circular economy. It has been stressed that support to the SPECA countries is needed at both the WTO accession stage and post-WTO accession stage and implementation. UNECE representatives expressed their commitment to work closely with the SPECA countries on these important priority areas, including through the SPECA Working Group on Trade, which is chaired by Tajikistan this year.

Welcoming remarks:

H.E. Mr. Abdurahmon Abdurahmonzoda, Deputy Minister of Economic Development and Trade of Tajikistan and Chair of the SPECA Working Group on Trade, welcomed all representatives of the SPECA countries and the UNECE secretariat to the consultative event on the collaboration of the countries in the WTO process. He recalled that this meeting was rescheduled twice due to the postponement of the WTO Ministerial Conference (WTO MC) in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mr. Abdurahmonzoda highlighted the historical importance of this year's WTO MC for the Central Asian region given it has been co-hosted by Kazakhstan.

The times are difficult for world society, world trade, multilateralism and regional trade in the SPECA region. SPECA countries need to intensify efforts to build trust and a stable basis for the regional trade, including through going beyond the small share of the SPECA region – less than one percent of world exports. The WTO remains a foundation for this. SPECA countries have to act together to address these challenges, including promoting the international rules-based trading system under the WTO as stipulated under SGD 17.10. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Afghanistan are already WTO



members. Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are in the process of accession. The participants recommended collaboration to achieve together the objectives of their countries in the WTO.

Mr. Dmitry Mariyasin, Deputy Executive Secretary, UNECE, thanked Tajikistan for its leadership within SPECA Working Group on Trade. This meeting presented a great opportunity to update on the recent developments, also building on the work done in 2021 under the chairmanship of Uzbekistan. Mr. Mariyasin also congratulated Kazakhstan for co-hosting the long-awaited WTO MC, also recognizing that the Central Asia is at the spotlight. This event also provided stimulus to the WTO acceding candidates, including from Central Asia, to join the WTO. Global economic integration is particularly relevant for the SPECA landlocked countries' economic development, competitiveness and trade. He stressed that UNECE continues to stand ready to support SPECA countries, including vis-à-vis the WTO matters. The support with the implementation of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement is a concrete example of this work, including in the cooperation with partners like ITC and UNCTAD. The UNECE work streams, including trade facilitation readiness assessments, studies on regulatory and procedural barriers to trade, provide a good platform for this support. He further stressed the UNECE's strong focus on sustainable trade, which is an important area for the regional work. He hoped that the SPECA WG on Trade, supported this year by ESCAP and chaired by Tajikistan will discuss this important dimension; and suggested that Azerbaijan, as a next year's chair, also looks at the sustainability angle.

Ms. Elisabeth Tuerk, Director, Economic Cooperation and Trade Division, UNECE, welcomed all participants during the WTO MC dynamic week. She highlighted the following points: 1) the SPECA sub-region, being at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, is extremely important to the world trade; 2) trade itself is very important for the SPECA countries; and 3) SPECA sub-region is important for UNECE. There are a number of issues at the table of the WTO, including the WTO accession work, which is of relevance for several SPECA countries, such as Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. She noted that the SPECA countries that are acceding to WTO and those that are already WTO members exchanged views and experiences on the WTO accession process, at a meeting which took place in December 2021. Beyond the accession, there are a number of areas of relevance, including regular WTO Committee work, multilateral and plurilateral negotiations and for small countries it might be difficult to participate in all work streams. Importantly, many areas are linked to the UN SDGs, thus it is critical to maximise synergies between environment and trade. She said that trade facilitation is an obvious entry point for the UNECE to support the WTO work and encouraged the delegations to look at the draft mapping with key UNECE areas, which can contribute to the WTO work. She concluded with the invitation to the delegations to participate at the Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards to discuss many relevant areas for the SPECA countries.

Tour de table and open discussion on the topics:

1. Cooperation among the SPECA countries in the WTO process: presentations of SPECA country representatives on their experience in the WTO process; exchange of experience and possibilities for mutual assistance
2. Implementation of the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy
3. Efforts to attain sustainable trade in the sub-region (SPECA Principles of Sustainable Trade)
4. New initiatives on the standardization and digitalization of trade and multimodal transport data and document exchange in the SPECA sub-region.



H.E. Mr. Abdurahmon Abdurahmonzoda, Deputy Minister of Economic Development and Trade of Tajikistan and Chair of the SPECA Working Group on Trade, shared about Tajikistan's WTO accession process. Tajikistan applied for the WTO accession in 2001 and it took 11 years before it joined the WTO. During this period, Tajikistan had 9 Working Party meetings in Geneva. In 2012, Tajikistan signed the protocol of accession. He highlighted the following priority areas for the WTO accession process:

1. Political decision to finalize the accession process
2. Development of an action plan
3. Negotiations team set up (with several levels), who have knowledge of WTO rules, history etc.
4. Close work between Geneva-based and capital-based delegates
5. Active engagement with key WTO members
6. Support by the donors and institutions
7. Selection of an optimal strategy (regarding strategic decisions/choices how the countries would like to accede the WTO (developed/developing country)).

He highlighted various tracks of accession negotiations, including goods and services and elaborated on Tajikistan's outcomes. In conclusion, Mr. Abdurahmonzoda expressed the readiness to support Uzbekistan in its accession process, including through the SPECA work.

Mr. Shovgi Mehdizade, Deputy Director, Department for Economic cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, noted the active engagement of Azerbaijan in the SPECA activities. Azerbaijan actively supports activities of SPECA, including the recent participation of the Ambassador Israfilov in the Tashkent SPECA meeting in 2021. He said that for the region one of the main challenges is transport connectivity. There is need to implement concrete activities, which should be results-oriented and, in addition to SDGs, other indicators are of relevance.

Ms. Gulchin Alasgarova, Deputy Head of Department for Trade Policy and WTO Issues, Ministry of Economy of Azerbaijan, informed the participants about Azerbaijan's WTO accession process, which was initiated around 20 years ago. She said that the last WP meeting took place 5 years ago, due to internal processes and the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, at the bilateral level, 21 negotiations took place and 5 bilateral protocols were concluded. She stressed that the implementation process has been difficult and has required the coordination of the internal work with various agencies. Lack of public awareness and limited involvement of domestic producers have been listed among key challenges in the process. She recognized the ongoing work with donor organizations such as USAID, EU and UN agencies and informed about the recent Study visit to Kazakhstan on the WTO accession process experience sharing.

Ms. Ainur Amirbekova, Department Director, QazTrade in Kazakhstan, informed that QazTrade was established to provide analytical support with the WTO processes. The WTO accession process was challenging as it required both compliance with WTO rules, but also the rules of the Eurasian Economic Union. She said that at the moment Kazakhstan is a very active WTO member and is ready to support WTO acceding countries.

Mr. Nurlan Kulbatyrov, Deputy General Director, QazTrade in Kazakhstan, spoke about the work of Kazakhstan vis-à-vis the SPECA Principles of Sustainable Trade. He noted that the implementation of principles in Kazakhstan has been very high (5 out of 11 principles have been implemented). He further



stress that UNECE outreach, including the recent webinar series on MSME has been very useful. A priority topic for Kazakhstan and SPECA in general is trade facilitation and digitalization. He also referred to the assessment of cross-border paperless trade project with ESCAP and the multimodal work with the Caspian region. Responding, **H.E. Mr. Abdurahmon Abdurahmonzoda**, reiterated that connectivity issues are one of the key areas for the region and stressed that capacity building through the SPECA are very important. The reference has been made to Ready4Trade: Central Asia project by ITC.

Mr. Nurlan Dzusumaliyev, Head of Division on Trade Policy of the Ministry of Economy and Commerce of the Kyrgyz Republic, referred to the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Kyrgyz Republic and countries in the region and called on related work within SPECA to support post-pandemic recovery. He said that the Kyrgyz Republic hopes for the successful outcome of WTO MC 12, which is important for the region.

H.E. Mr. Atageldi Haljanov, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Turkmenistan, shared about the recent developments related to the initiation of the WTO accession process by Turkmenistan recognizing the importance of this moment for the country. In February 2022, the General Council approved the request to start the WTO accession process. The first WP meeting will be organized soon. In this process, Turkmenistan plans to actively engage with governments and non-government organisations. Referring to the adopted socio-economic development programme, he informed about the start of the work on the work plan with the WTO accession Division. The WTO accession process will support more intensive integration, facilitate exploring new markets, increasing competitiveness and improving business environment. He said that diversification, investment in innovation and technologies, removing NTMs, integrating circular economy approaches are key in this process. He further shared about the priority areas for Turkmenistan, highlighting that sustainable energy and transport infrastructure areas. He stressed that SPECA needs to become a reliable transport hub and referred to the important work under the SPECA Ashgabat Initiative and other decisions taken at the SPECA Governing Council session in Ashgabat. In conclusion, the reference has been made to the need to have a commitment to build sustainable, circular economy within SPECA

Mr. Badriddin Abidov, Deputy Minister of Investment and Foreign Trade of Uzbekistan, expressed Uzbekistan's strong commitment to become WTO member and referred to the recent progress in the process of accession. He informed that 3 Working Party groups took place and the next one is planned after the WTO MC12. Uzbekistan has established the Roadmap and a negotiating group domestically focusing on various issues. Extensive work has been going at the national level to address the requests of the WTO members. He stressed that capacity building activities by donors and experience from neighbour countries are critical in this process.

Responding, **H.E. Mr. Abdurahmon Abdurahmonzoda**, referred to a number of forthcoming meetings, which are of relevance to the SPECA countries, including Regional trade facilitation meeting in Alma Aty the following week; and Heads of State meeting in Dushanbe aimed at raising connectivity agenda. He also mentioned an important visit of Ms. Algayerova and Ms. Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary General of the UN, to the Central Asian countries. **H.E. Mr. Atageldi Haljanov**, also informed about the forthcoming Caspian region Heads of State meeting planned for 29 June. **Mr. Nurlan Kulbatyrov**, referred to the launch of the Trade Portal (part of ITC Ready4Trade project) in Kazakhstan, was planned for 1 July.



Mr. Mario Apostolov, Regional Advisor, Economic Cooperation and Trade Division, briefed about the work progress on trade facilitation in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan and informed about the launch of a WTO TFA readiness assessment work in Turkmenistan. He presented key dimensions of SPECA Working Group on Trade:

- 1) Consultations on WTO processes, including support with WTO areas, such as agricultural standards; e-commerce; supply chains.
- 2) Trade facilitation, including through UNECE Trade Facilitation recommendations; Assessments on the readiness of countries; Digitalization and documents exchange.
- 3) Sustainable trade, including through UNECE work on NTMs, such as studies on regulatory and procedural barriers to trade; and joint work with UNCTAD on databases. The SPECA Principles on Sustainable Trade has been relevant for this work.
- 4) Multimodal transport data, focusing on corridors, data exchange as part of UN/CEFACT work.

Concluding the meeting, **Ms. Elisabeth Tuerk**, reflected on the meeting's outcomes. She said that SPECA countries have been facing challenges in the WTO accession process and negotiations. There are also challenges related to the implementation of the rules at the national level post-WTO accession process. Support is needed to both WTO accession candidates and WTO Members. Information sharing and capacity building are key in this process and she reiterated that UNECE is ready to support SPECA countries with trade-related work. She also said that there are important priority areas for the SPECA sub-region, which include sustainable trade, connectivity, trade facilitation and circular economy.



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