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(SPECA)**

SPECA/WG-Trade/2022/EN/10

**Seventeenth session of the SPECA Working Group on Trade**

**Singapore, 31 August 2022**

**REPORT**

**Recommendations of the seventeenth session of the SPECA Working Group on Trade**

The seventeenth session of the SPECA Working Group (WG) on Trade reviewed country experiences in the implementation of the strategic documents of the WG and noted with satisfaction the accelerating progress of their realization in the region. The participants discussed the following topics: report on the activities in 2021-2022; strengthening the cooperation of the SPECA countries negotiators in the World Trade Organization (WTO); implementation of the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy and Principles of Sustainable Trade, including ongoing work on harmonizing border-crossing procedures and documentary formalities among the SPECA countries; using international standards for the digitalization of trade and multimodal transport data and document exchange; non-tariff barriers to trade; and projects for trade and sustainable development in the SPECA subregion.

The participants recommend to the Governments of the SPECA participating countries to:

1. Strengthen collaboration among the SPECA countries on trade policy issues, notably regarding the outcomes of the WTO-related side events in December 2021 and June 2022, the implementation of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA), and WTO accessions of SPECA countries,
2. More actively use SPECA as a collaborative platform of the countries to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, notably to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to trade,
3. Strengthen capacity development of trade policymakers in the SPECA subregion to negotiate trade agreements that help to achieve sustainable development,
4. Refrain from implementing trade restrictive measures in light of external shocks, such as food shortages and supply chain disruptions,
5. Continue to include trade facilitation measures and the Principles of Sustainable Trade in national and regional work programmes, cooperation plans, best-practice exchanges, fundraising, and the use of standards and tools for sustainable trade to achieve the SDGs,
6. By the next SPECA Trade Working Group meeting, review the implementation of the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy, and the Ashgabat Initiative on reducing barriers to trade and transport in the SPECA subregion, using UN instruments, reinforce the work on

implementation of the previously adopted recommendations regarding these strategic documents,

7. For the sessions of the WG in 2023 and the Governing Council sessions in 2022 and 2023, prepare an update of the Roadmap on the Implementation of the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy, considering the achievements so far and new items to work on,
8. Endorse the documents presented at the session of the SPECA WG on Trade:
  - ESCAP, UNEP and UCTAD (2021). Asia-Pacific Trade and Investment Report 2021: Accelerating Climate-smart Trade and Investment,
  - ESCAP & UNECE (2021). Digital and sustainable trade facilitation in United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA),
  - Revised Roadmap for the implementation of the SPECA trade facilitation strategy,
  - Principles of sustainable trade – explore possibilities to develop an implementation roadmap for one of the next sessions of the working group,
9. Organize a seminar in Baku, Azerbaijan in October 2022 on digitalization of data and document exchange in the SPECA subregion aligned with UN/CEFACT standards for the digitalization of trade and multimodal transport data and document exchange (<https://unttc.org/stream/electronic-trade-and-transport-documents-and-data>) as a regional event dedicated to using the package of UN/CEFACT standards. The participants noted that it was time to move beyond the already successful national projects, such as the Single Window, and look into such advanced trade facilitation and e-business concepts as data pipeline,
10. Marking the excellent cooperation with GIZ and USAID on trade facilitation in the subregion, strengthen the collaboration network with international organizations and development partners on trade policy, trade facilitation, sustainable trade, and digitalization of multimodal transport and supply chain data and document exchange. Notably, strengthen cooperation with GIZ, ITC, ADB/CAREC, as well as UNCTAD, IRU, OSCE, OSJD, ECO, the World Bank, USAID, ADB, and others. Invite the international development partners to use SPECA as a vehicle for intergovernmental and interagency collaboration,
11. Amend Transit Agreement text on elements on which documents can be exchanged in electronic format,
12. Accelerating accession of all remaining SPECA countries to the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-Border Paperless Trade Facilitation in Asia and the Pacific, noting that implementation is starting this year, following entry into force of the treaty in 2021.

The participants expressed their hope for fruitful cooperation among the SPECA countries on all aspects of regional cooperation, covered by the SPECA WG on Trade: in the WTO process, trade facilitation, sustainable trade, non-tariff barriers, and digitalization of supply chains and multimodal transport data and document exchange.

## REPORT of the 17<sup>th</sup> session

### Opening and organizational matters

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) jointly organized the seventeenth session of the SPECA Working Group on Trade on 31 August 2022, back-to-back with the tenth session of the Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Forum: Next Generation Trade Facilitation for Sustainable Development (29-30 August 2022), in the Fairmont Hotel, Singapore and virtually.

#### A. Participants

Representatives of the following SPECA participating countries took part in the session: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The following United Nations agencies and programmes participated in the session: UNECE, ESCAP, as well as ADB (CAREC) and International Think Tank for LLDCs.

The Working Group supports cross-border and regional cooperation for the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda in the SPECA region, with a focus on sustainable trade, (notably SDG targets 17.10 and 17.11). The session focused on reviewing progress in the implementation of the documents and deliverables of the SPECA Working Group on Trade approved by the 14<sup>th</sup> session of the SPECA Governing Council on 21 November 2019: updated Terms of Reference; Programme of work for 2021-2022; SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy; Principles of Sustainable Trade in the SPECA subregion; and Concept Note on a Regional Study on Regulatory and Procedural Barriers to Trade (<https://unece.org/speca/events/fourteenth-session-speca-governing-council>). Another direction added to the plans of the WG was the digitalization of multimodal transport data and document exchange using the UN/CEFACT standards and Multimodal Transport Reference Data Model.

#### B. Opening

**H.E. Mr. Abdurahmon Abdurahmonzoda**, Deputy Minister of Economic Development and Trade of the Republic of Tajikistan and Chairperson of the SPECA Working Group on Trade, opened and **chaired the session**. He welcomed the participants, and expressed gratitude to ESCAP, UNECE and SPECA staff for fruitful cooperation in the field of trade facilitation. He noted the activities to increase transparency of cross-border procedures, eliminating regulatory and procedural barriers and strengthening capacity of businesses in compliance with regulations. H.E. Mr. Abdurahmonzoda observed that during a consultative SPECA meeting on cooperation in WTO process in Geneva (June 2022), the participants identified the following as priority work: trade and multimodal connectivity, digitalization of trade procedures, trade facilitation, sustainable trade, and circular economy. The support for SPECA countries is needed in WTO and post WTO accession stages on topics of trade facilitation. H.E. Mr. Abdurahmonzoda remarked that trade and trade facilitation are a priority of Tajikistan, and that the country will continue to pursue open door policy, aiming to contribute to strengthening sustainable development in the region.

**Ms. Rupa Chanda**, Director of the Trade, Investment and Innovation Division, ESCAP, highlighted the instrumental role trade has played during the last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, including facilitating the movement of essential goods. She noted, however, that it has not been easy, and that dialogue and cooperation, achieved through such fora as this one, have been important. Ms. Chanda reported that according to the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation,<sup>1</sup> SPECA countries have made significant progress in implementing cross-border

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.untfsurvey.org/group?id=SPECA>

paperless trade measures. However, there is room for further improvement, notably in the implementation of cross-border trade facilitation measures and providing more space for the participation of women and SMEs in foreign trade. She further reported that to help SPECA countries with accelerating progress towards digitalizing trade procedures, readiness assessment for cross-border paperless trade have been conducted in six central Asian countries, and one study was ongoing in Tajikistan. Ms. Chanda highlighted that ten ESCAP member States have either signed or acceded to the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific, which entered into force in 2021, and congratulated Turkmenistan for its accession earlier in 2022. She stated that ESCAP will continue to provide support in this area for SPECA countries, and expressed hope that participants found the last two days of the Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Forum useful in this regard. Ms. Chanda concluded in reiterating that ESCAP stands ready to provide additional support to countries to ratify and implement the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific.

**Ms. Elisabeth Tuerk**, Director, UNECE Economic Cooperation and Trade Division, noted that the world is currently facing the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. Ms. Tuerk noted that the SPECA region has little experience in building modern regional cooperation and integration, but the current challenges are pushing SPECA countries in that direction. She reminded the participants that SPECA objectives mirror what the heads of states of SPECA countries expressed in the Joint Statement in Avaza, which includes connectivity, cooperation, trade, and sustainable development. She assured that UNECE is dedicated to support SPECA and the implementation of its key instruments including the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy and Principles of Sustainable Trade, as well as the Ashgabat Initiative on reducing barriers to trade and transport using UN instruments. Ms. Tuerk noted that UNECE also supports work on analyzing non-tariff measures, including those imposed during the pandemic and efforts to prevent them from becoming barriers to trade, as well as digitalization of trade and multimodal transport information exchange. She concluded that this session would be used to review SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy as well as the SPECA Principles of Sustainable Trade with a view to further action.

### **Session 1: Report of the Chair of the SPECA WG on Trade**

The **Chairperson** of the SPECA WG on Trade presented the Progress Report of the SPECA WG on Trade.<sup>2</sup> The activities included Round table under the auspices of the SPECA WG on Trade on sub-regional collaboration in the WTO process (8 December 2021, Geneva); SPECA side event during the 12<sup>th</sup> WTO Ministerial Conference (14 June 2022, Geneva); Readiness assessments for cross-border paperless trade in Turkmenistan; Readiness assessments for cross-border paperless trade in Tajikistan; Business Process Analysis of trade procedures related to trade in sustainable trade-friendly goods in Kazakhstan; Draft national trade facilitation strategy of Uzbekistan; Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation in United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia; Working Paper on the harmonization of border-crossing procedures in the SPECA region (updated working document of the SPECA WG on Trade); Capacity-building events in support of the establishment, functioning and regional cooperation of the National Trade Facilitation Committees in the SPECA countries) (20-22 June 2022, Almaty; 23 March 2022; 16 Nov. 2021, Tashkent); Guide on how to establish and operate a Trade Facilitation Enquiry Point for SPECA countries, which is used to establish a Trade Facilitation Enquiry Point in Uzbekistan; Technical Specification for a Uniform Customs Information Page in the SPECA Countries; Review of the results of implementing Authorized Economic Operator schemes; Time Release Studies; Seminar in support of Turkmenistan to start its WTO accession process. A SPECA Seminar/Conference on the promotion of UN/CEFACT standards for digitalization of trade and multimodal data exchange is scheduled for 24-25 October 2022, in Azerbaijan.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/SPECA%20TWGs%20Progress%20Reports%20Trade%202022.pdf>

## **Session 2: Non-tariff measures, trade facilitation and sustainability in post COVID-19 recovery among SPECA countries**

**Mr. Alexey Kravchenko**, Economic Affairs Officer, Trade Policy and Facilitation, Trade Investment and Innovation Division, ESCAP, presented ten recommendations for SPECA countries on ensuring trade and investment in the region are “climate-smart”. The recommendations were based on joint report by ESCAP, UNEP and UNCTAD (2021) *Asia Pacific Trade and Investment Report. Accelerating Climate-smart Trade and Investment for Sustainable Development*.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Kravchenko, in particular, highlighted that countries in the SPECA region have significant room to put climate as part of their trade policy, including lowering tariff and non-tariff barriers to environmental goods, substituting fossil fuel subsidies with more directed social support systems, adopting climate-smart non-tariff measures (such as energy efficiency requirements on imports), accelerating trade digitalization (noting that end-to-end trade transaction digitally could save emissions equivalent to planting 1.5 trees), incorporating climate considerations in regional trade agreements. Mr. Kravchenko cautioned that modelling conducted by ESCAP shows that countries in the region stand to bear high impact by potential carbon mitigating trade measures, such as carbon pricing and carbon border taxes – such as those soon to be implemented by the European Union.

**Mr. Yann Duval**, Chief, Trade Policy and Facilitation, Trade Investment and Innovation Division, ESCAP added that recommendations on making trade and investment climate “smarter” would need to be adapted to national contexts.

**Mr. Mario Apostolov**, Regional Adviser, UNECE, noted a large number of issues are facing the region and world as a whole, including recovering from COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Mr. Apostolov presented the progress in the implementation of the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy: updating the study on the harmonization of border-crossing procedures; activities on standardized data sharing; development of a SPECA Guide for on establishment and functioning of trade facilitation enquiry points (WTO TFA Art.1.3: [https://www.unttc.org/sites/unttc/files/2022-04/Guide%20to%20the%20Implementation%20of%20Art.%201%20para.%203%20of%20the%20WTO%20TFA%20-%20TFA%20Enquiry%20Points\\_EN.pdf](https://www.unttc.org/sites/unttc/files/2022-04/Guide%20to%20the%20Implementation%20of%20Art.%201%20para.%203%20of%20the%20WTO%20TFA%20-%20TFA%20Enquiry%20Points_EN.pdf)); several studies analyzing non-tariff measures introduced under the pandemic, notably a study on Regulatory and Procedural Barriers to Trade in Uzbekistan), a tool (web page) to exchange of information on procedures between the national regulatory agencies (Customs), etc. He noted the process of reviewing the Roadmap for Implementation of the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy has started and asked the participants to consider what objectives have been met and could be removed, what measures could be revised or added. Other changes, such as inclusion of digitalizing cross-border trade data exchange in the SPECA subregion, were supported, particularly by Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan would chair SPECA in 2023, and this topic is central for them, in particular trade facilitation and e-commerce. He noted the establishment of Trade Facilitation Enquiry Point in Uzbekistan, using the new SPECA Guide on TF Enquiry Points, and called for other countries to follow suit. Mr Apostolov suggested to include further work on digitalization of cross-border data exchange along cross-border supply chains in the Roadmap. He invited the group to think of drafting a similar Roadmap on the implementation of the SPECA Principles of Sustainable Trade, which go well with suggestions by ESCAP on climate-smart trade presented earlier and suggested that trade facilitation is more welcome by policymakers than sustainable trade, while the group needs to work even more in terms of addressing climate issues. He suggested that eventually these principles could be added to the development strategies of the countries. If everything will be done according to the UN standards for electronic exchange, including required data elements, this will pave the way to smooth transition on “talking the same language” by various stakeholders in the supply chain, even for the use of blockchain technologies. Digitalization of multimodal data and document exchange using the UN semantic standards would

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unescap.org/kp/APTIR2021>

be of particular importance in the region, possibly warranting a future pilot project on digitalization of specific business documents (consignment notes, invoices) to start with.

**Ms. Larisa Kislyakova**, UNECE consultant, presented current work on harmonizing border-crossing procedures and implementing the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy. She noted the importance of the private sector in implementing the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy, as UNECE studies on cross-border regulations, with their support, are now conducted on annual basis. Ms. Kislyakova noted that even though there are fewer procedural obstacles, there are still long queues at the border crossing points, suggesting there is scope for implementing the newest technologies for trade facilitation and e-business in managing these queues, upgrading border crossings' physical infrastructure, as improvements in border crossing at one country can be cancelled if they are just one sided. Ms. Kislyakova noted that it is necessary to highlight that there is a trend to reductions in procedural obstacles. National committees for trade facilitation, together with the private sector, play an important role at first regional then national levels. The pilot project in the Caspian Corridor identified some bottlenecks, where there it seems that currently there are logistical barriers, which increase the price tag of trade operations. She further noted the involvement of additional donors (including USAID) in projects helping achieve the objectives of the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy. She called for further involvement of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan in this work.

**Ms. Nadezhda Sporysheva**, Economic Affairs Officer, Economic Cooperation and Trade Division, UNECE, presented the work of the UNECE Economic Cooperation and Trade division on sustainable trade in SPECA. She highlighted the UNECE side event on circular economy and trade on 27 June 2022. UNECE member States asked UNECE to consider integrating environmental and circular economy considerations into the Studies on regulatory and procedural barriers to trade. The UNECE Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards session held on 27-28 June 2022 discussed trade and circular economy entry points as well as circular supply chains. Another venue for supporting SPECA by UNECE is through the WTO platform, particularly on sustainable trade. An example of this is the WTO Trade and Environment Sustainability Structured Discussions (TESSD), which discuss trade and environmental sustainability. This platform has 74 members, and all SPECA countries that are WTO members are represented. The four working groups focus on: environmental goods and services; trade-related climate measures; circular economy; and subsidies. The TESSD platform is useful for experience sharing on various environmental topics and for regional perspectives. UNECE involvement is important to share expertise to SPECA countries who are not yet WTO members. Ms. Sporysheva informed the participants on the first dialogue on circular economy and traceability of value chains in Tajikistan (6 Sept 2022); and a session titled "circular economy and trade: opportunities and challenges for transition economies" (Geneva, 30 Sept).

**Ms. Zulfia Khamitovna Karimova**, CAREC, ADB, informed the participants of several initiatives relating to trade, including forthcoming joint trade-related capacity building work. One of the initiatives is an ambition to develop and adopt a CAREC region-wide free trade agreement. At present, the analytical work is geared towards creating a basis for understanding of what this agreement would entail. Several chapters have been prioritized, such as trade in goods, services, SPS, TBT, and e-commerce. A further initiative is to develop a corridor performance measurement and monitoring, an initiative with more than 10 years timespan – a mechanism for monitoring six CAREC indicators, measuring times and bottlenecks to cross the border crossing points. The reports identify impediments and recommendations, which ultimately result in tangible results, resolving a lot of problems. She invited CAREC countries to submit proposal on using the data for research purposes to help steer action. She concluded by saying that ADB continues to support countries in pushing for cross-border cooperation for further acceleration of cross-border trade and transport facilitation.



### **Session 3: Perspectives of the SPECA participating countries, discuss the five directions of work of the SPECA WG on Trade**

**Azerbaijan** highlighted the importance of trade and transport connectivity with the other SPECA countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact, which the Government of Azerbaijan tried to alleviate with targeted measures. Important steps have been taken in developing economics relations with other SPECA countries, especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Azerbaijan is paying attention to increasing the role of digitalization and related economic transformation, which are expected to further help boosting cooperation in the subregion. Participants were informed that Azerbaijan is developing smart city and smart village concepts which will further digital transformation. Due to its favourable geolocation, Azerbaijan is investing in east/west and north/south connectivity, and the country is transforming into a transportation hub. The “Zangezur Corridor” (linking Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhichevan via Armenian territory), in particular, is expected to add a new connectivity artery, and will become the shortest corridor between Türkiye and Central Asia and is expected to significantly add to transport capacity in the entire region. The Baku-Tbilisi car/railway road has great transport potential for the SPECA countries. Azerbaijan has the largest sea fleet in the Caspian Sea and has the capacity to expand it using its own shipyards. Trade facilitation has become a key instrument to improve international business environment, as Azerbaijan implements an open-door policy. Modern tools, such as the implementations of green corridors, improvement of the operation of the Single Window, integration to eGov and eServices, eCustoms portals, simplified Customs control, and increased transparency, lead to significant time savings. It is hoped that the next level of cooperation will further connect Asia and Europe.

**Kazakhstan** held, as part of implementing the SPECA Strategy on Trade Facilitation, a number of meetings to discuss and address problematic issues, including (1) a regional meeting on Trade Facilitation, attended by government agencies, Customs, Customs brokers, chambers of commerce and association of Central Asian States. During this meeting, participants analysed ideas and proposed solutions and opportunities for cooperation to expand cross-border trade in the region; (2) SPECA meeting on cooperation issues. The meeting discussed opportunities for mutual assistance in implementing the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy; (3) Regional meeting of national trade facilitation committees.

Kazakhstan, together with other Central Asian countries, is implementing peer-learning initiatives and believes that public and private stakeholders sharing objectives and challenges is a good tool to raise awareness, hear the other side and learn from each other. Regarding the SPECA Principles of Sustainable Trade, Kazakhstan integrates these Principles into its development planning. Kazakhstan conducted self-assessment of compliance with the SPECA Principles of Sustainable Trade. Despite some notable progress, there are issues which need further attention. Kazakhstan considers it necessary to study the balance between quick gains and long-term goals. Trade facilitation procedures, as well as climate change, and development of critical and systemic thinking of civil servants through development of human capital are important elements for focusing future work. In this context, civil society and businesses must become agents of change and work constructively with the government on the Principles of Sustainable Trade. Regarding NTMs, the COVID-19 pandemic had a huge impact on trade, but now most measures have been cancelled. At the same time, geopolitical concerns make governments all over the world introduce new NTMs. So, the use of NTBs is still very relevant. In July 2022, Kazakhstan launched a trade facilitation information portal. Tradeinfo.kz as part of a joint project with ITC. This portal contains step-by-step information on the rules, procedures for imports, export, and transit of goods. It also allows to identify opportunities for simplification, harmonization and automation of formalities, and to receive feedback from users.

**Kyrgyzstan** noted that its economic policies are geared towards two major areas: anti-crisis post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery and systemic reform to attract investments. Kyrgyzstan is working on digital transformation. The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and breakdown of global supply chains pushed Kyrgyzstan to actively work on transitioning to digitalization of its trade

procedures. Each country has a strategic roadmap and internal development plan development, and Kyrgyzstan proposed in this/next year to pay more attention to coordination of all SPECA countries' procedures, and their synchronization. All SPECA countries may have similar enquiry points, Single Window systems, digitalized internal procedures, but further development of cooperation needs to be aimed at coordination and on mutual recognition. In terms of transport corridors, Kyrgyzstan is working under CAREC auspices on six corridors. As part of work on the implementation of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement, Kyrgyzstan has joined the review of the Revised Kyoto Convention on the simplification of custom procedures. New law on e-commerce and tax legislation have been adopted recently. Together with ITC, Kyrgyzstan had a pilot group of SMEs, specifically micro enterprises which were able to open their first online channels with their products going on sale online. The new trade facilitation roadmap also supports sustainable development and trade in Kyrgyzstan. The roadmap includes strategies for further reforms of the procedures. As part of this roadmap, Kyrgyzstan is aiming to go paperless on cross-border trade procedures. This year, Kyrgyzstan conducted a study on readiness to join the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific and noted that Kyrgyzstan has started the accession process. Kyrgyzstan has also an information portal for cross-border trade. In conclusion, Kyrgyzstan proposed to carry out work on further cooperation as part of the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy and the Framework Agreement, and suggest creating a few concrete projects for regional coordination, mutual recognition and cooperation. Kyrgyzstan concluded that for cross-border trade, there must be recognition of documentation and standards, often voiced by the private sectors as a bottlenecks, and there should be further attention to this.

**Tajikistan** noted that countries in Central Asia are some of its key trading partners, evident by their bilateral foreign trade turnovers. The increase in turnover was achieved due to rapid actions of Governments of SPECA countries, including the Government of Tajikistan. Measures were taken to support vulnerable members of society and SMEs to maintain macroeconomic stability and contribute to further economic development. The current national trade policy focus is to (1) encourage export diversification, (2) encourage export-oriented products, and (3) facilitate trade. The recent most notable development was the establishment of the coordination committee on trade facilitation, which serves as a platform aimed at resolving issues facing the private sectors. There are now eight technical working groups. More than 20 legislative acts were drafted and accepted as part of the work of this committee. Based on the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy, the committee developed a roadmap, which contains action-oriented trade facilitation reforms. Digital and sustainable trade facilitation contributed to the response to the COVID-19 crisis while addressing trade disruptions. Transparency is a key trade policy objective. With contribution from the ITC, Tajikistan launched its national trade portal. This portal contains 55 step-by-step descriptions of export and import, transit procedures for more than 1,500 products. To keep the portal updated, a working group has been established which has eliminated a number of procedures that were not in compliance with relevant international agreements. Authorized economic operators have been added to help entrepreneurs, resulting them in obtaining rights for preferential customs treatment. More than 20 seminars were conducted to train custom officials for risk analysis using digitalized eTIR platform. This platform is becoming an important step in digitalization of cross-border procedures. Additional work is being conducted in identifying and eliminating non-tariff barriers. Two time release studies were conducted to gauge the effectiveness of trade facilitation reforms, proving their success, but there is always room for improvement.

**Turkmenistan** noted that despite difficult global economic conditions, there has been growth in trade, particularly with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan. To realize full economic and sustainable potential of the region, formation of modern transport links is required. The current transport routes are primarily multi-modal. Because of that, there are significant delays, including those due to custom procedures. A recent pilot project on the global transit document was launched, using blockchain technology. This is an open-source technology, which is, however, protected from unsanctioned changes through encryption. This promises to be a positive step towards



simplification of procedures. Such digitalization of all documents will enable tracing all documents from the beginning to the end of transactions - important particularly for multi-modal transport. Turkmenistan started procedures to accede to WTO, with working group established. Concrete steps in simplification of trade procedures in line with relevant WTO agreements were taken. In 2022, Turkmenistan also joined the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific. Turkmenistan concluded by highlighting that SPECA countries must have a constructive dialogue as they have mutual interests to achieve their full potential. Turkmenistan is fully committed to cooperation.

**Uzbekistan** noted that trade facilitation is of top priority for faster and safer movement of goods. It is of particular importance to Uzbekistan due to its geographic location, while taking into consideration the provisions of WTO TFA as a priority. Uzbekistan, with help of UNECE, took stock of the country's legislative situation for accession to the WTO TFA, and made a number of legislative regulatory proposals to identify gaps, which were subsequently implemented. As part of this work, risk assessment procedures were established, the electronic single window project in the country received a boost, and an interactive trade facilitation enquiry point (WTO TFA Art.1.3) is being established. The enquiry point also acts as a one way stop for any electronic queries which are promptly forwarded to relevant authorities. Work is advancing on the creation of a national trade portal, goods time release studies, accelerated release of goods, as well as creating a national committee for simplification of trade procedures. Currently, the Ministry of Investment and Foreign Trade is developing a strategy which would guide further work on trade facilitation. This strategy takes into consideration the current global trends, NTBs, various indicators, as well as relevant recommendations by international organizations.

#### **Session 4: Updated programme of work and adoption of decisions, covering the five areas of work of the WG.**

**Mr. Yann Duval**, regarding the way forward for next events, including areas in which ESCAP is working which would be helpful to SPECA countries, noted that ESCAP believes that cooperation between SPECA countries, and further all ESCAP member States is of paramount importance. As such, the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific is a platform that was negotiated by member States, and most SPECA countries actively participated in these negotiations. He noted that the Framework Agreement is very flexible, irrespective of the stage of implementation of trade facilitation or e-commerce, and everyone who joins it stands to benefit from it, from exchange of information to pilot projects. Mr. Duval noted that there is a trend in the SPECA countries to accede to the Framework Agreement, including Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan (the first to do it), Tajikistan is close to acceding, and Kyrgyzstan is nearing accession. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan would be important players in this process. If all SPECA countries join, members can use the SPECA platform to implement pilot projects among with SPECA countries (since pilot projects don't necessarily have to involve all signatories), as pilot projects with other non-SPECA countries. For example, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a signatory, and Türkiye expressed its intent on joining. By joining, countries can influence what is happening on broader regional level, as under the Framework Agreement countries will have to decide what happens in regional action plans. As part of that, signatories would have to select the specific international standards used (including the UN/CEFACT standards). In addition, ESCAP provides support on request. For example, ESCAP's findings show that that some trade information portals become outdated very quickly. ESCAP, in collaboration with UNCTAD and ITC, developed an online course on enhancing trade information portals (TIP)<sup>4</sup> on ensuring they are sustainable, ESCAP and UNECE suggest using these instruments to ensure TIPs are up to date. Currently, the course is in English only, but we could consider a request to develop it in Russian. UN/CEFACT has developed a recommendation on TIPs.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unescap.org/training/etip>

**Mr. Alexey Kravchenko** demonstrated ESCAP's Trade Intelligence and Negotiation Advisor (<https://tina.trade>) which seeks to aid policymakers in negotiating trade agreements. The idea behind TINA is that it aims to help country negotiators in their analytical tasks, such as offensive lists, defensive lists, potential tariff concessions (those offered to existing preferential trade partners), analysis of text agreements already implemented by potential trade partners, partial equilibrium modelling. These tasks are usually done on ad hoc basis from scratch and require significant financial and time resources. TINA, on the other hand, seeks to automate many of these manual tasks (for free) and could aid trade negotiators in SPECA countries in their further negotiations. Mr Kravchenko noted that a future joint course on TINA with CAREC is in the pipeline, but ESCAP stands ready to provide trainings to policymakers in the region on its use should there be interest.

**Mr. Mario Apostolov**, spoke about the current work and plans for the five areas of work of the WG on Trade: cooperation in the WTO process; trade facilitation; principles of sustainable trade; NTBs; digitalization of multimodal transport and trade. (1) The countries and the SPECA WG on Trade would maintain the positive impulse of the two SPECA negotiators meetings in December 2021 and June 2022, focusing on harmonizing the countries positions on key topics in the WTO negotiations, as well as helping countries acceding to WTO manage their effort. (2) On trade facilitation, it is important to continue implementing the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy, further review the level of implementation of the various activities in the Roadmap for the implementation of this Strategy, taking into account the accomplished on harmonizing procedures, information exchange, enquiry points, implementing the Framework Agreement on Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific, cooperation on authorized economic operators and transit coordination, etc. Review and update the Roadmap, including new areas for work. (3) Enhance work on implementing the Principles of Sustainable Trade. UNECE has prepared at least three studies on the readiness of the countries to implement these Principles, including about the link between trade facilitation, water management and sustainable trade in the sub-region. ESCAP presented its study on the link between trade facilitation and climate change. Now, it is time for the countries to take further steps. Kazakhstan has already integrated the Principles in its national development plans. Other countries may consider doing the same. The countries may prepare a roadmap on the implementation of the SPECA Principles of Sustainable Trade at the forthcoming meetings of the SPECA WG on Trade. (4) On non-tariff barriers to trade, the last two years UNECE has prepared a short scoping regional study on regulatory and procedural barriers to trade and is in the process of finalizing the national RPBT study for Uzbekistan. The plans for the regional study were to make it a full-fledged study for publication. When the Uzbekistan study is finished it will be distributed to all the countries via the SPECA WG on Trade, in addition to other channels. (5) During the Covid-19 pandemic, the UNECE and UN/CEFACT moved forward a package of standards and supporting tools (data sets, data structures, XSD and XML schemas) for the digitalization of trade logistics and transport documents accompanying goods, which can support multimodal digital corridor development (see <https://unttc.org/stream/electronic-trade-and-transport-documents-and-data> and [trade/uncefact/mainstandards](https://trade.uncefact.org/mainstandards)). Some initial studies were done with SPECA countries on the implementation of this approach, and this work will continue. A SPECA seminar/conference is planned to take place in Baku in October 2022.

In a subsequent discussion it was noted that there is always talk about cross-border information exchange, but little action. As such it was suggested to focus work on mutual recognition of electronical documents, such as certificates, licenses and other documents.

The 17<sup>th</sup> session of the SPECA WG on Trade reviewed and endorsed several key documents for the future work of the WG:

- ESCAP, UNEP and UCTAD (2021). Asia-Pacific Trade and Investment Report 2021: Accelerating Climate-smart Trade and Investment  
(<https://www.unescap.org/kp/APTIR2021>)
- ESCAP & UNECE (2021). Digital and sustainable trade facilitation in United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA)  
(<https://www.unescap.org/kp/2022/untf-survey-2021-SPECA>)
- SPECA Guide to the Implementation of Art.1.3 of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement: Trade Facilitation Enquiry Points  
([https://www.unttc.org/sites/unttc/files/2022-04/Guide%20to%20the%20Implementation%20of%20Art.%201%20para.%203%20of%20the%20WTO%20TFA%20-%20TFA%20Enquiry%20Points\\_EN.pdf](https://www.unttc.org/sites/unttc/files/2022-04/Guide%20to%20the%20Implementation%20of%20Art.%201%20para.%203%20of%20the%20WTO%20TFA%20-%20TFA%20Enquiry%20Points_EN.pdf) and [https://www.unttc.org/sites/unttc/files/2022-04/Guide%20to%20the%20Implementation%20of%20Art.%201%20para.%203%20of%20the%20WTO%20TFA%20-%20TFA%20Enquiry%20Points\\_RU.pdf](https://www.unttc.org/sites/unttc/files/2022-04/Guide%20to%20the%20Implementation%20of%20Art.%201%20para.%203%20of%20the%20WTO%20TFA%20-%20TFA%20Enquiry%20Points_RU.pdf) in Russian)

**H.E. Mr. Abdurahmon Abdurahmonzoda** closed the session and expressed his appreciation to the secretariats of UNESCAP and UNECE for having organized the session and their support in implementing the Programme of Work of the SPECA Working Group on Trade.