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OPEN REGIONAL FUND FOR SOUTHEAST EUROPE - FOREIGN TRADE
Support to regional economic integration

INFO

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• IN THE FOCUS •
**EMPOWERING
PARTNERSHIPS
IN THE
DIGITAL ERA
AT THE REGIONAL
TRADE FACILITATION
CONFERENCE**



Unleashing Collaborative Partnerships in the Digital Era
How to Leverage Competence and Resources for Trade Facilitation



• EVENTS • DECISIONS • COOPERATION •
• SUPPORT • WESTERN BALKANS • CEFTA •

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SUPPORT TO REGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION



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ECONOMIC INTEGRATION INFO

Editorial:

Elevating Achievements in Regional Economic Integration

As we bid farewell to another remarkable year, we're excited to share with you the latest developments from our project dedicated to advancing regional economic integration. The commitment to collaboration across key areas - trade facilitation, trade in services, quality infrastructure, e-commerce, and startups - has not just flourished but has set new standards for progress.

Our Regional Trade Facilitation Conference in Tirana showcased the region's commitment to working together. It was a significant moment where different facets of our trade facilitation efforts seamlessly came together, illustrating the transformative power of collaboration and the collective impact of our endeavours.

As we reflect on our journey from September to December, each step reveals distinct milestones and achievements. From successful pilot validations to the issuance of Bosnia and Herzegovina's first AEO Certificate, the Customs AEO Program has seen significant advancements. Coordinated efforts in developing 20 pest-specific contingency plans mark achievements in Phytosanitary Agencies collaboration.

Expanding into the construction sector, Quality Infrastructure enhancement emphasizes collaboration with Accreditation and Standardization Bodies and strengthened ties with Market Surveillance institutions. Harmonized efforts in E-commerce see CEFTA markets align their regulations as well as culminating in the creation of the Balkan eCommerce Alliance (BECA). The CEFTA Working Group addresses imbalances in Trade in Services, prioritizing transparent and accurate reporting. The Western Balkans Startup Alliance's General Assembly establishes a Board of Advisors, shaping strategic goals for the upcoming period.

As the year concludes, we extend our warmest wishes to you for a restful break. Anticipating exciting collaborative ventures in the coming year, we continue to champion regional cooperation and foster even closer integration.

Happy New Year!

Stay tuned for updates by visiting our [website](#).

ORF FT Team

• IN THE FOCUS •

Empowering partnerships in the digital era at the Regional Trade Facilitation Conference

In a landmark gathering on November 8th - 9th, our Regional Trade Facilitation Conference in Tirana took center stage, driving regional cooperation forward. Themed “Unleashing Collaborative Partnerships in the Digital Era” and organized together with Albanian Customs, the conference brought together 200 officials and business leaders from CEFTA, the Western Balkans, Moldova, EU Member States, the EU Commission, WCO, and the United States.

This dynamic event not only showcased a dedicated commitment to digital collaboration but also provided a platform for enhancing partnerships. As we collectively tackled

the challenges of the fast-changing digital landscape, the conference emphasized the need for new approaches. By embracing a collaborative and forward-thinking spirit, it paved the way for navigating the mix of opportunities and challenges in the digital era.



• TRADE FACILITATION •

Successful Pilot Validation of the AEO Programmes

With the support of the project, two pilot validation of AEO programmes were carried out successfully in October in Podgorica and Pristina. The primary focus of these missions was to assess the compliance of the respective AEO programmes with EU regulations and ensure their effective application. We are pleased to announce that both programmes received positive evaluations, confirming their alignment with EU requirements. This success paves the way

for both Customs Administrations to initiate the official CEFTA validation procedure.

Building on this achievement, the Montenegro Customs took a proactive step by submitting its application in December 2023. We eagerly anticipate the upcoming validation process, which marks a significant leap forward in enhancing trade facilitation within the CEFTA region.



Customs and SPS Agencies Joint Forces to Elevate AEO Benefits

In our commitment to enhance the AEO benefits within CEFTA economies, Customs and Sanitary and Phytosanitary agencies are joining forces in a collaborative alliance. Following a highly productive meeting in Banja Luka in May 2023, four CEFTA parties promptly established Working Groups (WGs), seamlessly integrating SPS agencies with Customs administrations.

The mission is clear: streamline inspection procedures, minimize formalities, and ensure unwavering compliance with regulations. Initial WG meetings have already brought challenges and potential solutions to light, with ongoing discussions poised to shape a harmonized approach for all CEFTA economies.

While integrating SPS agencies into AEO programs poses challenges, there is confidence in CEFTA's expertise to devise region-wide solutions. These solutions aim to maximize benefits for AEO holders, promoting both safe and legitimate trade across the region.



Bosnia and Herzegovina's AEO Programme Marks Milestone with first AEO Certification

In a big step forward, Bosnia and Herzegovina's AEO programme, launched in August 2022, is making great progress in improving customs procedures and overall efficiency. The Indirect Taxation Authority (ITA) celebrated a significant milestone by awarding its inaugural Authorized Economic Operator (AEO) Certificate to NELT, signifying a true game-changer for businesses.

Going beyond mere formality, the AEO certificate brings tangible benefits, offering time and cost savings, along with compliance relaxation advantages. Its true value lies in the significant potential it unlocks for businesses to flourish on a regional scale through mutual recognition within CEFTA economies. With several new authorizations on the horizon, the BiH Indirect Taxation Authority is getting ready to initiate the CEFTA validation procedure for the mutual recognition of AEO certificates, following the lead of other CEFTA economies.

The project's impact extends beyond supporting CEFTA Customs Administrations in enhancing their programmes; it has also generated significant interest from businesses through maintaining the regional AEO Association. This transformative journey has seen a remarkable leap, progressing from 8 certificates several years ago to an impressive milestone of over 200 by 2023.



Advancing Pest Control Measures for Safe Trade in the CEFTA Region

In the ongoing commitment to secure and efficient trade, the CEFTA Decision on Facilitating Trade for Fruit and Vegetables, adopted in February 2020, plays a crucial role. Aligned with EU standards, this Decision effectively manages pest risks, ensuring safe trade. To maintain these high standards, the development of pest-specific contingency plans is a mandated necessity.

The project actively supports CEFTA parties in strengthening their efforts, collaboratively crafting joint pest-specific contingency plans. Currently, 9 plans have successfully been adopted. In partnership with other available support, phytosanitary agencies are committed to jointly developing and adopting a total of 20 pest-specific contingency plans. This highlights their strong dedication to fostering a safe and predictable trading environment within the CEFTA region.



• TRADE IN SERVICES •

Navigating trade asymmetries: Collaborative solutions

Persistent trade imbalances in goods and services pose a notable challenge for CEFTA parties engaged in international trade. In a recent gathering in Bar, Montenegro, the CEFTA Working Group on Trade in Services Statistics, FATS, and FDI statistics confronted these challenges head-on.

The primary focus was on pinpointing and rectifying trade asymmetries, fostering a collaborative dialogue among CEFTA parties. The meeting underscored the critical importance of accurate statistical reporting to the CEFTA Secretariat and the necessity to align with EU standards. This joint effort reflects a commitment to discovering innovative solutions and promoting transparency in regional and international trade.



• STRENGTHENING OF THE QUALITY INFRASTRUCTURE SYSTEMS •

Advancing Quality Infrastructure in CEFTA

Expanding its scope beyond electrical and machinery sectors, the project is now actively contributing to the assessment of the construction sector within CEFTA parties. International and local experts are conducting thorough evaluations to pinpoint improvement needs aligned with EU standards, setting the stage for future capacity-building measures.

Building on previous assessments in electrical products and machinery, the project organized local events in Sarajevo, Chisinau, Skopje, and Pristina. In collaboration with respective institutions, these events served as platforms for sharing results and recommendations, sparking discussions and enhancing public-private dialogue within the quality infrastructure system.



Fostering Regional Collaboration in Quality Infrastructure

Recognizing the crucial role of regional exchange and discussions in elevating quality infrastructure in the region, the project supported a regional workshop hosted by the Macedonian Accreditation Body and an online workshop with CEFTA Standardization Bodies. These gatherings served as dynamic forums for sharing success stories and best practices, with a particular focus on digitalization—a crucial element in the region’s capacity-building efforts.

The workshops offered practical insights from both CEFTA parties and the EU, providing effective strategies to enhance internal processes and services for Quality Infrastructure institutions. This shared knowledge serves as a guide to advance Quality Infrastructure capacities in line with international standards..



Strengthening capacities and cooperation among Market Surveillance institutions within CEFTA

The project actively supports collaboration among Market Surveillance Institutions (MSI) in CEFTA to ensure compliance with industrial product legislation and protect public interests. The initiative focuses on organizing joint market surveillance actions for electrical products and machinery, aiming to establish harmonised procedures aligned with EU best practices.

In October, the project conducted comprehensive training sessions for MSI inspectors, introducing EU best practices in market surveillance for machinery and electrical products. These sessions equipped inspectors with essential knowledge to conduct effective market surveillance, elevating their skills and capacity.

The project's collaborative approach and training initiatives aim to establish an effective market surveillance system within CEFTA parties. By aligning with EU best practices, MSIs enhance their individual capacities, contributing to the broader goal of ensuring safety and compliance of industrial products in the region.



TECHNICAL HARMONISATION

Global approach

- As an addition to New approach, started in 1989., establishment of reliable conformity assessment;
- Basic principles:
 - Defining modules for various phases of conformity assessment procedures and for their use;
 - Manufactures **free to choose** between different conformity assessment procedures provided by the applicable sectoral directive;
 - Defining procedures for the designation of notified bodies;
 - The use of CE marking;
 - The generalization of the use of European standards related to quality assurance (EN ISO 9000 series) and to the requirements to be fulfilled by the bodies operating quality assurance (EN ISO/IEC 17000 series);
 - Setting up of the accreditation systems;
 - International trade between EFTA and the EU means of mutual recognition of conformity assessment (MRAs), conformance with CEFTA standards.

• IMPROVING MARKET ACCESS
FOR E-COMMERCE PROVIDERS •

A step forward in harmonization with the EU Acquis on e-commerce and consumer protection

Addressing the challenge of an unharmonized regulatory framework hindering regional e-commerce, CEFTA markets have taken decisive steps to enhance the regulatory framework conditions. The aim is to enable traders to better organize their online businesses and the necessary requirements for exporting and importing goods.

In a significant advancement towards aligning with EU standards, the project organized regional training sessions on e-commerce and consumer protection laws. Acknowledging the obstacles posed by diverse regulations, CEFTA markets are committed to creating more favorable conditions for regional e-commerce businesses.

The initiative kicked off in Budva, Montenegro, with focus on consumer protection within both CEFTA and EU frameworks. Emphasizing the need for alignment with EU regulations, the successful training extended to Skopje, North Macedonia, covering essential e-commerce topics.

These sessions, part of a broader initiative, aim to implement core rules, promote knowledge sharing on EU regulations, and foster a unified digital landscape across CEFTA markets. CEFTA's commitment to harmonizing e-commerce legislation is a significant move towards creating a seamless digital experience for businesses and consumers in the region.



Transforming Parcel Delivery in Western Balkans

In collaboration with ERGP and CEFTA, our recent workshop in Thessaloniki on October 19th, 2023, is a significant move towards a more transparent and cost-effective parcel delivery system in the Western Balkans. Focused on enhancing delivery price regulations, the aim is to benefit businesses and enhance the overall consumer experience. The collaborative efforts extend to regulatory authorities participating in the ERGP Contact Network meeting, hosted by the Hellenic Telecommunications and Post Commission EETT.

Our commitment to positive changes in the delivery landscape, coupled with the swift adoption of EU regulations, underscore our dedication to improving parcel delivery in the region. The joint efforts of the postal regulatory bodies illustrating a shared vision for a more efficient and transparent delivery system.



Fostering Collaborative Dialogue to Enhance E-commerce in CEFTA

In our efforts to empower e-commerce in CEFTA economies, we focus on fostering structured public-private dialogue (PPD). Our vision includes mentorship programs for e-commerce associations, enhancing their capabilities in researching relevant PPD topics and interacting effectively with regulatory bodies.

Collaborating with the Ministry of Finance and Economy in Albania, we facilitated the creation of the Action Plan for the E-commerce Sector in Albania, engaging stakeholders throughout the process. Additionally, we supported the Albanian E-commerce Association in actively participating in the plan's development, fostering structured public-private dialogue.

At the Western Balkans Digital Summit, the [Albanian e-commerce Association](#) joined a panel discussion alongside [DHL Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Customs Administration of Serbia](#), [E-comm Asocijacija in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), and the CEFTA Secretariat. Together, they explored opportunities to advance e-commerce in the region.

The 6th eCommerce conference organized by the [Macedonian e-commerce Association](#) showcased a panel on "Scaling Up Cross-Border E-commerce." Representatives from Mona, Smart Living, Moj brand, and Aaos discussed successes, barriers, and legislative changes needed for a more productive e-commerce environment in the Western Balkans.

Looking ahead, the Balkan eCommerce Alliance will enhance regional PPD efforts, fostering collaboration and dialogue within the e-commerce community.



Balkan eCommerce Alliance: Unifying the Voice of eCommerce

In a pivotal move, e-commerce associations from North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia & Herzegovina: [Macedonian eCommerce Association](#), [Ecommerce Association of Serbia](#), [Albanian eCommerce Association](#), [Association for Internet Trade "eComm" in Bosnia & Herzegovina](#), and [e-Commerce Association in Bosnia & Herzegovina](#), have come together to establish the Balkan eCommerce Alliance (BECA). The primary objective is to lay a solid foundation for BECA to become the unified voice of eCommerce in the Western Balkans.

Through a signed Memorandum of Understanding and Operational Guidelines, BECA's founding members are dedicated to:

- 1. Advocating Business-Friendly Policies:** Lobbying for favorable CEFTA policies and regulations.
- 2. Contributing to Policy Development:** Participating in structured public-private dialogue to shape e-commerce-friendly policies.
- 3. Promoting Trade in the Region:** Collaborating to streamline e-commerce customs procedures.
- 4. Knowledge Sharing:** Collaborating on e-commerce operations, technology, security, and best practices.

BECA is set to implement initiatives like the Regional Trust Mark programme, utilize the www.eCommerce4all.eu platform, and organize joint study visits. Supported by an organizational structure with advisers and experts, BECA aims to become the vital voice for e-commerce in the region.

Furthermore, BECA's outreach will extend to international business networks and trade platforms, ensuring broader access to opportunities and partnerships.



• IMPROVING MARKET ACCESS
FOR START-UPS •

Strategic Milestone: Western Balkans Startup Alliance Assembly

The Regional Western Balkans Startup Alliance, comprised of 18 hubs from the Western Balkans, convened for its General Assembly meeting in Tirana. The meeting resulted in the establishment of the Board of Directors: Arjan Ymeri from Oficina, Albania, Jovana Music from HUB387, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sasa Ivanovic from Innovation Fund of Montenegro, Nina Nikolikj from Startup Macedonia, Neda Trifunovic from Digital Serbia Initiative, Kosta Andric from ICT HUB, Serbia. The primary focus of this board is dedicated to the precise task of crafting the alliance's strategy and devising an action plan for the upcoming year. **Ms. Delina Ibrahimaj**, the Minister of State for Entrepreneurship and Business Climate in Albania, visited WBSA members during the event, expressing her endorsement of this collaborative

effort. Notably, this gathering marked the culmination of the project "Supporting the professionalisation of the start-up ecosystem in the Western Balkan region," implemented by GIZ on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).



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HIGHLIGHTS August-December 2023



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