Implementing trade policy through efficient import and export rules and procedures

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The Committee on International Trade adopted an own initiative report by Jean-Pierre **AUDY** (EPP-ED, FR) on implementing trade policy through efficient import and export rules and procedures.

The report stresses the importance of effective import and export rules and procedures for the implementation of trade policy. It recalls, however, that the effectiveness of any trade policy measure depends largely on the Union’s ability to ensure it is properly enforced.

MEPs stress the need for better cooperation between the Commission departments responsible for trade policy and those responsible for customs policy, in particular by including the latter more systematically in the teams which negotiate trade agreements. The Commission is called upon to pay particular attention to the problems encountered by SMEs, in particular by facilitating the process of adapting their IT systems to those employed by customs administrations, at the lowest possible cost, and by simplifying the procedures for securing 'authorised economic operator' status.

Tariff classification, value, origin and economic arrangements: MEPs point out the particular importance of the rules concerning the tariff classification, value and origin – preferential and non-preferential – of goods. They encourage the Commission to strive continuously to improve these rules, both at Community level and in the multilateral contexts of the WTO and the WCO, making them more transparent, predictable, simple and effective.

The report notes that it is important in general terms to ensure that the preferences granted to countries benefiting from preferential arrangements in certain sensitive sectors do not, by virtue of excessively flexible rules of origin, lend themselves too easily to being exploited by very competitive third countries. The Commission is also called upon to consider simplifying the 'procedures with economic impact', introducing more flexible procedures and a paperless system.

Trade facilitation: MEPs attach the utmost importance to the trade facilitation negotiations under way since August 2004 in the WTO. They consider that the issue of trade facilitation could be concluded and implemented separately, without disrupting the Round, and therefore call for it to be removed from the Single Undertaking. The report also supports the Commission's ambitious plans to include a chapter on facilitating trade and customs cooperation in all the new free trade agreements it negotiates.

New customs tasks: MEPs reiterate the need to establish at European Union level a plan to combat counterfeiting and piracy. They call on the Commission and the Member States to take all necessary measures to ensure that goods imported with a view to being placed on the European Union market comply with European consumer protection standards, particularly as regards health and safety, to prevent the circulation of products or substances which could be dangerous for consumers.

A worrying erosion of freedom in the name of security: while acknowledging the legitimacy of concerns relating to the security of people and goods, the report stresses the need to strike a fair balance between control and facilitation, in order not to hamper international trade needlessly or excessively.

In this context, MEPs urge the Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue (TLD) and the Commission to continue their efforts to ensure that the US legislation requiring the scanning of all US-bound cargo is modified in line with a risk-based approach. They call on the Commission to raise the matter in the Transatlantic Economic Council (TEC) and other bodies and persuade the US to change its decision.

An ongoing lack of harmonisation: although the compatibility of the Union's customs system with WTO rules was essentially confirmed, the report notes that both our trading partners and European economic operators themselves continue to call for greater harmonisation between national administrations in the implementation of Community customs legislation. In fact, pernicious discrepancies are sometimes found between Member States, for example with regard to the levying of VAT on imports, conditions for access to certain simplified procedures, the frequency of physical checks on goods and penalties.

MEPs criticise the reluctance of the Commission and the Member States to envisage, at this stage, new structures to ensure that Community customs legislation is applied in a uniform manner. They call on the Commission and the Member States to seriously consider the possibility of establishing a unified European Union customs service to enable customs rules and procedures to be implemented more effectively throughout the European Union's customs territory.