

DIGITALIZATION IN CUSTOMS: ECONOMIC AND INSTITUTIONAL IMPACTS

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Abstract: Customs administrations are experiencing a significant transformation propelled by the swift growth of international trade and the rising complexity of global supply chains. Digitalization has become a crucial element in this evolution, enhancing efficiency, transparency, and risk management within customs operations.

This paper examines the economic and institutional ramifications of digitalization in contemporary customs administration through qualitative document analysis of institutional reports and scholarly literature.

The results demonstrate that electronic customs systems can lead to a reduction in clearance times by 30–70% and a decrease in global trade costs by roughly 14.3%. The application of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and the Internet of Things further boosts operational efficiency, risk-based management, and visibility within the supply chain. However, the study also indicates that the advantages of digitalization are distributed unevenly, attributed to gaps in infrastructure, differences in regulatory frameworks, and the global digital divide. This emphasizes the importance of coordinated international policies and institutional collaboration.

Keywords: customs digitalization, trade facilitation, risk management, international trade

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Introduction

The rise of globalization and the rapid expansion of international trade have significantly increased the complexity associated with cross-border transactions. As a result, customs administrations have evolved from their traditional roles as revenue-collecting institutions to become crucial players in trade facilitation, border security, and regulatory compliance. Even with technological advancements, inefficient customs procedures remain a major barrier to international trade, particularly in developing economies where trade costs can rise by up to 15% due to border inefficiencies (*Moisé et al., 2011*).

Digitalization has emerged as a key strategy to address these challenges. Through the use of automation, electronic data exchange, and risk-based decision-making, digital customs systems significantly reduce administrative burdens and enhance operational efficiency (*World Customs Organization, 2019*). According to international organizations

such as the World Trade Organization and the World Customs Organization, digitalization plays a central role in improving trade efficiency and minimizing transaction costs.

The main objective of this study is to analyse the role of digitalization and advanced technologies in customs administration and to evaluate their economic and institutional implications.

1. Theoretical framework and literature review

The modernization of customs is based on the principles of trade facilitation theory and institutional economics. Trade facilitation aims to minimize administrative obstacles to international trade, whereas institutional economics underscores the significance of effective institutions in reducing transaction costs (*Grainger, 2011*). Digital customs systems implement these theories by enhancing transparency, predictability, and compliance. Essential elements consist of automation, electronic data interchange, and risk management systems.

Recent advancements underscore the critical role of cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, blockchain, big data analytics, and the Internet of Things, which facilitate predictive risk analysis and improved visibility within the supply chain (*World Customs Organization & World Trade Organization, 2022*).

2. Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative framework that is based on systematic document analysis. It draws upon secondary data from institutional reports and academic references, including those from the World Customs Organization, the World Trade Organization, the European Commission, and UNCTAD.

Descriptive and comparative methodologies are employed to identify trends, assess implementation patterns, and evaluate the economic implications of customs digitalization. Such an approach enables a detailed understanding of both the merits and challenges of digital transformation (*European Commission, 2022*).

3. Results

3.1 Economic impact of digitalization

The process of digitalization greatly enhances the efficiency of customs operations. Clearance durations are shortened from multiple days to under one hour, and trade

expenses are lowered as a result of diminished administrative complexity. Furthermore, the frequency of physical inspections decreases as risk-based systems improve targeting effectiveness.

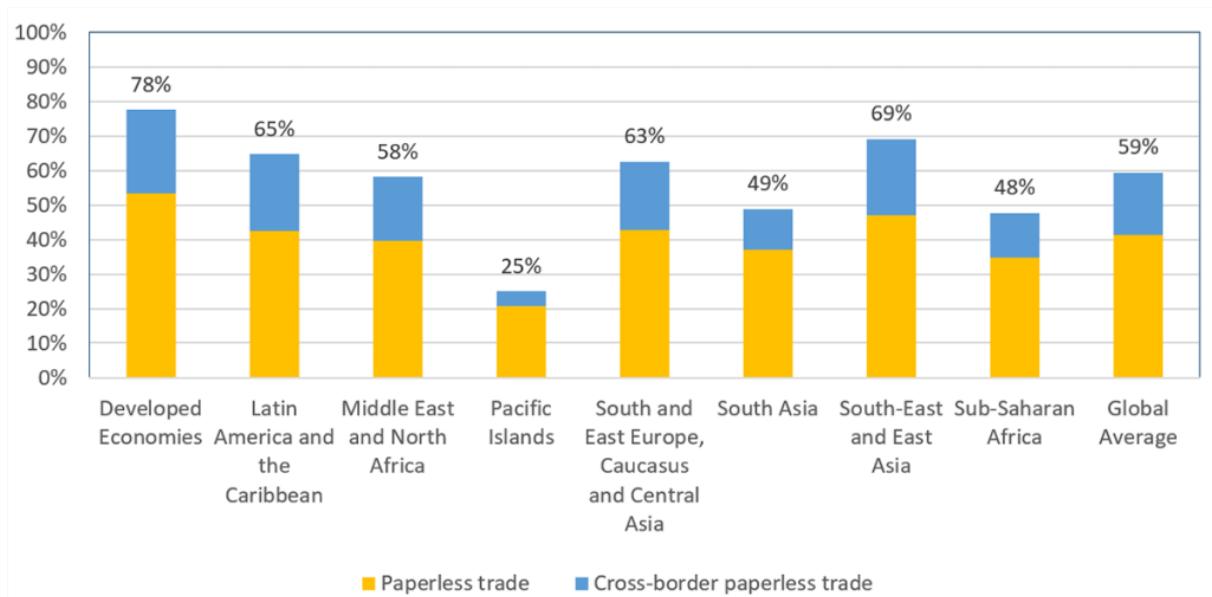
Table 1. Impact of digitalization on customs performance

Indicator	Before Digitalization	After Digitalization	Impact
Trade Costs	High	Reduced	Minimized by 14.3%
Clearance Time	Several Days	Less than 1 hour	Minimized by 30-70%
Physical Inspections	10-20%	Less than 5%	Reduced significantly
Processing	Manual	Automated	High efficiency

Source: (World Trade Organization, 2021; World Customs Organization, 2019)

3.2 Global digital divide

Figure 1. Global disparities in customs digitalization

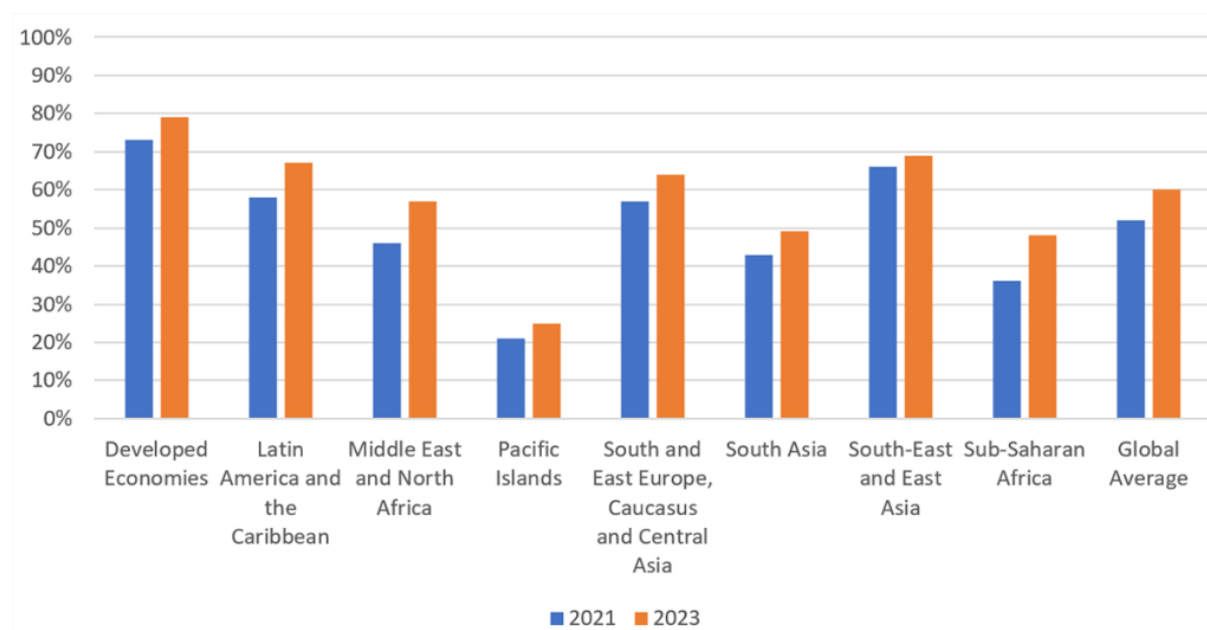


Source: (UNCTAD, 2023)

The noted disparities illustrate a distinct separation between developed and developing economies. The blue section denotes the digital measures that have been implemented, whereas the yellow section signifies those that are either partially implemented or planned for future implementation. High-income nations exhibit markedly elevated degrees of digital integration, propelled by robust infrastructure, sophisticated technological capabilities, and well-established institutional frameworks. Conversely, developing nations display diminished levels of digital adoption, attributable

to constrained financial resources, inadequate administrative capacity, and a lack of technological preparedness. These disparities are frequently represented in percentage-based metrics of digital implementation, underscoring the uneven global advancement in customs modernization. In summary, the data affirms that the digital transformation of customs administration is profoundly influenced by the overall economic and institutional development levels (UNCTAD, 2023).

Figure 2. Implementation of trade facilitation measures



Source: (UNCTAD, 2023)

This figure depicts the varying levels of trade facilitation measure implementation on a global scale. Countries with more developed institutional frameworks and enhanced technological readiness are inclined to implement more sophisticated customs procedures, which include electronic documentation, automated clearance systems, and integrated border management. Despite significant advancements, considerable differences continue to exist between economies, highlighting unequal capacities to carry out modern trade facilitation reforms (UNCTAD, 2023).

3.3 Technologies used in customs administration

The following table presents key advanced technologies used in customs administration. Artificial intelligence and machine learning improve risk analysis and targeting accuracy. Blockchain enhances transparency and security in data exchange,

while the Internet of Things enables real-time tracking of goods. Big data supports decision-making by analysing large datasets, contributing to more efficient and effective customs operations.

Table 2. Advanced technologies in customs administration

Technology	Function	Impact
Artificial intelligence	Risk prediction	Improved targeting
Machine learning	Pattern recognition	Higher accuracy
Blockchain	Secure data exchange	Increased transparency
IoT	Real-time tracking	Supply chain visibility
Big Data	Data analysis	Better decision-making

Source: (World Customs Organization & World Trade Organization, 2022)

The EU example presents concrete evidence that supports the general findings of this research related to the positive economic outcomes of customs digitalization.

4. Case study: European Union customs digitalization

The European Union offers one of the most sophisticated and cohesive frameworks for customs administration globally. Established in 1968, the EU Customs Union created a singular customs territory that allows for the unrestricted movement of goods without customs duties among member states. This system, overseen by the European Commission, implements a common external tariff and standardized customs procedures for trade with countries outside the EU. The primary aim of the Customs Union is to promote trade while maintaining a high standard of security and regulatory adherence (*European Commission, 2022*).

In the last ten years, the European Union has emerged as a prominent model for customs digitalization. It has introduced various electronic systems designed to streamline processes, enhance transparency, and improve coordination among its member states.

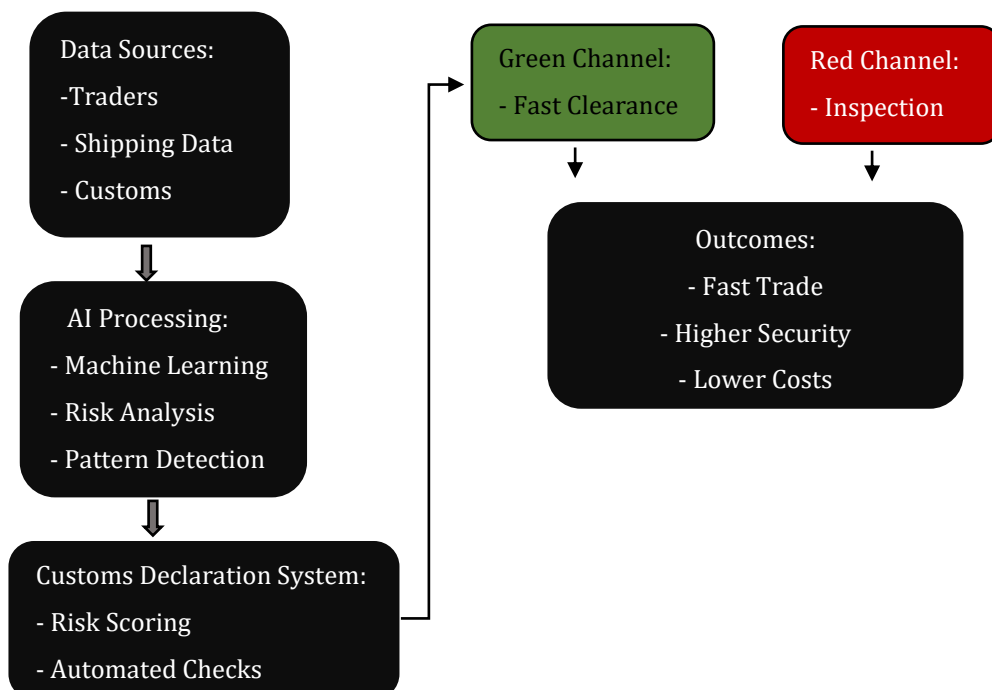
A pivotal aspect of this evolution is the establishment of the Single Window environment, which facilitates traders in providing standardized data via a singular digital entry point within the EU Single Window framework for customs, which consolidates multiple regulatory obligations into a cohesive digital interface (*European*

Commission, 2022). It functions as the user interface for the Single Window system, allowing traders to submit their data a single time. This greatly alleviates administrative burdens, removes redundant procedures, and speeds up clearance processes. Consequently, businesses enjoy reduced transaction costs and greater predictability in cross-border activities.

Moreover, the EU has launched centralized clearance systems, allowing companies to file customs declarations in one member state while their goods are physically processed in another. This advancement enhances operational efficiency and supports deeper integration of the internal market by promoting smoother trade flows across borders.

Another important element is the implementation of advanced risk management systems that utilize data analytics. By integrating data from various sources, customs authorities can more accurately pinpoint high-risk shipments, thereby reducing the need for physical inspections. This risk-based methodology not only enhances security but also facilitates legitimate trade.

Figure 3. AI-based customs risk management system in the EU



Source: (World Customs Organization & World Trade Organization, 2022)

The diagram demonstrates how data originating from traders, shipping intelligence and machine learning models is used to determine risk levels. Utilizing

automated risk scoring, customs authorities sort shipments into green or red channels, which allows for quicker clearance of low-risk goods and targeted inspections of high-risk consignments. This approach bolsters efficiency, security, and transparency in the operations of EU customs.

Additionally, the EU customs framework prioritizes interoperability and data sharing among national administrations. This collaborative strategy improves cooperation and guarantees the uniform application of customs regulations throughout the Union.

Nevertheless, despite these accomplishments, challenges persist. Variations in implementation among member states, substantial investment costs, and the ongoing need for technological upgrades underscore the intricacies of digital transformation.

In summary, the EU's experience illustrates that effective customs digitalization necessitates not only cutting-edge technologies but also robust institutional coordination, the alignment of regulations, and the formulation of long-term strategic plans are essential. This framework acts as a benchmark for other areas aiming to update their customs operations and enhance trade effectiveness.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that digitalization plays a crucial role in enhancing the efficiency of customs operations by decreasing clearance durations, minimizing trade expenses, and fostering greater transparency (*World Trade Organization, 2021*). The shift from manual processes to automated systems enables customs authorities to address the complexities of global trade more adeptly.

Nevertheless, the advantages of digitalization are not uniformly experienced across the globe. The existing digital divide hampers the capacity of developing nations to engage fully in digital trade frameworks (*UNCTAD, 2023*).

Variations in institutional structures, such as legal systems and administrative capabilities, further impede the interoperability of different systems. Moreover, the risks associated with cybersecurity pose an escalating threat, necessitating robust data protection strategies.

Consequently, the effectiveness of customs digitalization is contingent upon investments in technology, the enhancement of institutional capacities, the alignment of regulations, and the fostering of international collaboration. This relationship implies that

digital technologies, on their own, do not suffice to guarantee efficiency enhancements. Without a strong institutional framework—comprising well-trained personnel, effective governance mechanisms, and coordinated administrative processes – digital tools may be inadequately utilized or fragmented. Thus, countries with weaker institutional structures may face limited gains from digitalization, regardless of their technological expenditures. This holds significant consequences for the European Union, where disparities in institutional capacity among member states persist.

Within this framework, further enhancement of EU-level integration (federalization) could bolster the efficiency of customs digitalization. This indicates a shift towards greater centralised coordination and decision-making at the EU level, thereby reducing fragmentation among national customs systems. This can be accomplished through various policy initiatives:

- more profound harmonization of legal and procedural frameworks throughout member states;
- extension of centralized EU digital platforms;
- increased investment in capacity-building efforts for national administrations.

These initiatives would enhance interoperability and reduce disparities between member states, ultimately leading to a more efficient and cohesive EU customs framework.

Conclusion

The process of digitalization has significantly altered customs administration by enhancing efficiency, transparency, and risk management. Electronic systems enable quicker clearance procedures and lower trade expenses, thereby promoting global economic integration (*World Customs Organization, 2019*).

Nevertheless, obstacles such as infrastructure deficiencies, regulatory inconsistencies, cybersecurity threats, and the digital divide persist, hindering comprehensive implementation (*World Customs Organization & World Trade Organization, 2022*). Ultimately, digitization is not only a technological improvement but a revolutionary force that will determine the efficiency, equity, and resilience of global trade in the years to come.

In summary, the digitalization of customs is crucial for contemporary international trade; however, its success relies on coordinated global initiatives focused on fostering inclusive and sustainable development (UNCTAD, 2023).

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СТОПАНСКА АКАДЕМИЯ „ДИМИТЪР А. ЦЕНОВ” - СВИЩОВ
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ГЛОБАЛНИ И РЕГИОНАЛНИ ИЗМЕРЕНИЯ НА МЕЖДУНАРОДНИТЕ ИКОНОМИЧЕСКИ ОТНОШЕНИЯ

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Списание „Глобални и регионални измерения на международните икономически отношения“ (съкратено **ГРИМИО**) е правоприменник на изданията с научните резултати от ежегодната *студентска научно-практическа конференция*, организирана от *катедра „Международни икономически отношения“* при Стопанска академия „Димитър А. Ценов“ – Свищов. До 2020 година изданията са сборници със самостоятелни ISBN номера, а от 2021 до 2023 година са периодичен сборник с постоянен ISSN номер – достъпни във Виртуалната библиотека на Стопанската академия на адрес dlib.uni-svishtov.bg.

Първата конференция е проведена през 1996 година по идея на проф. д-р ик. н. Иван Стойков и на гл. ас. д-р Симеон Момчев, преподаватели към катедрата. Участници са студентите от трети курс на специалност МИО към Стопанската академия, а тематичният фокус е върху международните инвестиции.

От 2014 година към събитието се присъединяват преподаватели и студенти от *катедра „Международни икономически отношения“* при Икономически университет – Варна, а през 2015 година и от *катедра „Икономика и международни отношения“* при Русенски университет „Ангел Кънчев“.

През годините конференцията се утвърди като форум за научна изява на студентите и докторантите извън учебната аудитория и създаде възможност за разчупване на формалните отношения лектор-обучаем, обмяна на опит в провеждането на мероприятия, свободно споделяне на творчески идеи. Постепенно тематиката се разшири и обхваща широк спектър от области, влизащи в сферата на международните икономически отношения и международния бизнес.

Пленарната сесия на *Тридесетата конференция* се проведе на 16 май 2026 г. присъствено в Базата за обучение на Стопанска академия в с. Орешак и в дистанционен формат чрез платформата BigBlueButton.

Journal “Global and Regional Dimensions of International Economic Relations” (abbreviated **GRDIER**) is the legal successor of the publications with the scientific results of the annual *student scientific-practical conference*, organized by *the Department of International Economic Relations* at Dimitar A. Tsenov Academy of Economics - Svishtov. Until 2020, the editions are conference proceedings with independent ISBN numbers, and from 2021 to 2023 they are periodical collections with a permanent ISSN number - available in the Academy’s Virtual Library at dlib.uni-svishtov.bg.

The first conference was held in 1996 on the idea of Prof. Ivan Stoykov and Head Assistant Simeon Momchev, lecturers at the department. The first participants were the 3rd year IER students at the Tsenov Academy of Economics, and the thematic focus was on international investments.

Since 2014, the event has been joined by professors and students from *the Department of International Economic Relations* at the University of Economics – Varna, and in 2015 from *the Department of Economics and International Relations* at the Angel Kanchev University of Ruse.

Over the years, the conference has established itself as a forum for the scientific expression of students and doctoral students outside the classroom and has created an opportunity to break the formal lecturer-student relationship, exchange experience in conducting events, and freely share creative ideas. Gradually, the topics have expanded and cover a wide range of areas, entering the sphere of international economic relations and international business.

The plenary session of *the Thirtieth conference* was held on May 16, 2026 at Dimitar Tsenov Academy’s Training and Recreation Center in the village of Oreshak and online through the BigBlueButton platform.

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