

TRACECA Border Crossing Hotline Concept

Activity number 4.12 of the Action Plan for 2022-2026:

Organization of the work of the hotline in the border zone on the whole transit section of the Europe-the Caucasus Asia; Launch and operation of the hotline; 2022 – 2023

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Background

Availability of information is one of the key trade facilitation measures, necessary for seamless organization international transport. TRACECA countries on national level regularly publish large amount of information relevant for movement across their borders, including information available at the websites of various border crossing authorities and national level portals. Multiple contact points, helpdesks and hotlines have been established on national level in TRACECA countries to provide guidance and offer answers to reasonable enquires of traders, transporters, and other interested parties. On international level TRACECA website endeavors to offer comprehensive set of information that among other include details on TRACECA agreements, multilateral permits and border crossing (e.g., TRACECA Guide for Border Crossing).

Even though there is plenty of information available on national and TRACECA level, it appears that transport operators, forwarding agents and other participants directly involved in border crossing movements across TRACECA routes find very difficult to navigate through such large number of sources and abundance of information. They are also facing challenges in attempts to resolve practical issues that occur at the border zones in the time of actual border crossing.

While the national mechanisms have been and it will remain the core sources of information, coordination is needed on international level for implementations of international agreements. For example, to support application of the TIR Convention and answer related questions, the International Road Transport Union (IRU) operates hotline and has designated hotline emails.¹

The idea for creation of TRACECA hotline goes back to 2001 when it was proposed to establish a mechanism that could ease border-crossing procedures and help create transparent border-crossing process. At the 2nd IGC Annual Meeting held in 2002 in Tashkent the concept for the project on “TRACECA Common Information System” was approved that included a special part for “TRACECA Hot line” common system. The EU supported “Trade Facilitation and Institutional Support” project (2004-2006) included “TRACECA Hotline and Enhanced Communication Initiatives” component.² The project revealed that the TRACECA countries have established their own information dissemination systems, helpdesks, and hotlines as integral part of the responsible authorities such as border-crossing and customs bodies. It was envisaged to use TRACECA web site as a major platform for the Hotline (Information and Helpdesk).

Over time TRACECA countries have continued to develop their own national information systems and hotlines. Regardless on continuous efforts to keep TRACECA website updated, the function for serving as a platform for the Hotline presently is not fulfilled since it is very challenging to keep updated information on all TRACECA countries and there are no regularly updated linkages on existing national structures that provide relevant information, collect complaints etc. To address the issues on efficient navigation through multitude of available information and provide support in resolving border crossing issues along TRACECA routes, this document suggests renewed TRACECA Border Crossing Hotline Concept for further consideration.

¹ IRU; How to fill in a TIR Carnet brochure (page 2), available at: https://www.iru.org/sites/default/files/2017-03/How_to_fill_in_a_TIR_Carnet_EN_2.pdf

² TRACECA “Trade Facilitation and Institutional Support” project <http://www.traceca-org.org/en/technical-assistance/trade-facilitation-and-institution-support/documents/>

A. Objective and Scope

The objective of TRACECA border crossing hotline concept is to facilitate crossing the borders in international road freight transport along TRACECA routes by providing timely information, gathering information on impediments and issues faced, and provide guidance for addressing border crossing issues to the participants in transport operations at border zones (e.g., truck drivers, forwarding agents etc.). The border crossing hotline concept also includes issues related to facilitation of multimodal transport (road-sea-road) across Black Sea and Caspian Sea.

B. General Organization

The TRACECA border crossing hotline concept is based on three components:

1. International – TRACECA level component in responsibility of PS IGC TRACECA. This component has limited scope that includes support for harmonization in development of national border crossing hotline services and operation of a single TRACECA level hotline number, to provide general guidance and linkages to the national level component (e.g., national level hotlines, country level contact points).
2. National level component – in responsibility of National Secretaries and each MLA member state. This component includes separate national border crossing hotlines that operate on harmonized manner by call centers established in leading border crossing authorities at central level (e.g., Customs) in each TRACECA country.³

Multiple contact points in relevant authorized bodies (e.g., transport, Customs, border guards, immigration (passport control), veterinary, phytosanitary, food safety and other authorities) should be considered as a part of the national level component of the border crossing hotline.

The national level component (national border crossing hotlines and contact points) represents the core of this concept, since without well-developed national component it will not be possible to provide satisfactory services on border crossing along TRACECA routes.

If the MLA member states already have relevant dedicated hotlines, it is recommended to consider integrating functionalities of the national border crossing hotline with existing call centers.

3. Supplementary component that includes websites, social media and automated chatbots on both TRACECA and national level to provide general information and support border crossing hotlines (e.g., with linkages to national border crossing hotlines and information on contact points in TRACECA countries).

³ The operations of the national border crossing hotlines in each TRACECA country should be harmonized as far as possible based on this suggested concept.

For the TRACECA level hotline operated by PS IGC TRACECA it is recommended to:

- use a single number for services regarding all MLA member states: (e.g., “(+994) 9999” – *actual number to be agreed additionally*);
- provide services with discounted rates for international calls as much as possible (*possibilities to be explored*);
- operate non-stop 24/7 (*usage of automatic call distributors for international calls to the national border crossing hotlines to be considered for operations outside regular working hours of PS IGC TRACECA*).

For the national border crossing hotlines at TRACECA countries operated by the designated leading border crossing authorities (e.g., Customs), it is recommended to:

- have the same number in each MLA member state (e.g., “9797” – *actual number to be agreed additionally*) (e.g., “(+994) 97979” in AZE, ..., “(+998) 9797” in UZB);
However, if the MLA member state already has dedicated call center that could integrate border crossing hotline functionalities, then the existing number of the hotline should remain, and it is not necessary to introduce a new hotline number;
- enable calling within the country free of charge (*optionally: small charge to be considered to reduce nonsense calls*);
- operate non-stop 24/7 (*optionally: to operate at least one hour before and one after the working hours of road border checkpoints in the country if they do not operate 24/7*).

In general, both TRACECA level hotline and national border crossing hotlines in TRACECA countries, should provide speaking with operators of the call center in person. Use of automatic call distributors may be enabled to direct the calls to specially assigned operators (e.g., in relation to language or specific subject if multiple specialized operators are available).

Languages

The TRACECA level hotline operated by PS IGC TRACECA should provide services in Russian and English. For national border crossing hotlines in TRACECA countries it is recommended to provide services in the official language(s) of the MLA member state concerned and additionally in Russian and/or English.

Staffing and equipment

Call center size, staffing, and equipment requirements for TRACECA level hotline and for national border crossing hotlines in each MLA member state should be estimated based on expected call volumes per day (*for more details see part I below*).

Figure: TRACECA Border Crossing Hotline Concept



C. TRACECA level hotline operated by PS IGC TRACECA

Main services of TRACECA level hotline operated by PS IGC TRACECA include:

- providing general standardized information on:
 - border crossing points along TRACECA routes (e.g., type of the BCP, mode of transport allowed, applicable types of control, working hours);
 - border crossing requirements (e.g., exit, entrance and transit, regulation on export/import/transit; most common requirements and documents for conducting border crossing controls such as immigration, Customs, phytosanitary, veterinary, etc.).

The general standardized information will be provided based on available data from TRACECA Border Crossing Guide.⁴

- providing information on website links where more details are available related to the issue raised by the caller (by sending back to the caller a text message, if requested);
- providing information on national level hotlines and contact points in TRACECA countries where more detailed information could be obtained in a case of more complex enquires, not in the scope of the operator (by transferring the caller to the relevant national level hotline / contact point or by sending back to the caller a text message, if requested).

Information on website links, national level hotlines and contact points will be provided based on available data from TRACECA Contact Points Directories that will be developed.

For development of TRACECA Contact Points Directories, the TRACECA countries are kindly requested to provide information to the Questionnaires given in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 of this document, and to continuously update information provided.

(in next phase the information on website links, national level hotlines and contact points could be integrated in the updated version of the electronic TRACECA Border Crossing Guide)

Standard operational protocol (SOP) of TRACECA level hotline operated by PS IGC TRACECA is given in Appendix 3 of this document.

D. National level hotlines operated by TRACECA countries

The model for national level border crossing hotline operated by the leading border crossing authorities (e.g., Customs) at TRACECA countries envisages offering of following main services:

- providing standardized information on each individual border crossing checkpoint in the country that, may include: a) working time (regular and add-hoc changes); b) type of Customs procedures available; c) information on types of documents required; d) type of inspections controls required/available at border crossing; e) restrictions for crossing the border; f) overall standard time required to clear the border; g) services available at the border crossing.

⁴ TRACECA Guide for Border crossing (2017) is available at: <http://www.traceca-org.org/en/home/traceca-guide-for-border-crossing/> (continuous update of the information available in TRACECA Border Crossing Guide is needed)

- providing information on website links where more details are available related to the issue raised by the caller (by sending back to the caller a text message, if requested);
- providing information on contact points directly at the border crossing checkpoint, or at the regional/headquarter offices of the relevant authorities (e.g., transport, Customs, immigration, etc.) where more detailed information could be obtained in a case of more complex enquires, not in the scope of the operator (by transferring the caller to the relevant contact point or by sending back to the caller a text message, if requested).

It is recommended for TRACECA countries to develop and maintain National Contact Points Directories compatible with TRACECA Contact Points Directories mentioned above. Information on website links and contact points of relevant authorities on border crossing level and central/regional level or specialized agencies to be provided based on available data from National Contact Points Directories (see model suggested in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 of this document).

- recording relevant complaints, issues raised and potential suggestions that are not possible to be addressed immediately which require more systematic approach (e.g., legal changes, infrastructure improvements etc.). Such complaints, issues, and suggestion to be reported in systematic manner (e.g., weekly) to the relevant authorized bodies within the country. Highlights of such reports to be shared with PS IGC TRACECA with end of the year report.
- recording relevant complaints and issues that may require further investigation (e.g., issues related to corruption, smuggling, irregularities in procedures, unprofessional behavior). Upon assessment of emergency such complaints and issues may be reported immediately and/or in systematic manner (e.g., weekly) to the relevant authorized bodies within the country (e.g. anticorruption bodies, specialized investigation units in Customs, police other relevant agencies). Highlights of such reports to be shared with PS IGC TRACECA with end of the year report.

Recommended model of standard operational protocol (SOP) for national level hotlines operated by TRACECA countries is given in Appendix 4 of this document.

E. Processing by designated contact persons at authorized bodies of TRACECA countries

The border crossing hotline model envisages designation of contact points (with phone/email) within relevant authorities (e.g., transport, Customs, border guards, immigration, veterinary, phytosanitary, food safety and other agencies) at TRACECA countries to support responding of transferred calls (both from TRACECA hotline and national hotlines). The designated contact persons should support dealing with more complex enquires which are out of the scope of the operators at the call center, as well as with complaints, reported issues and suggestions.

The authorized bodies of TRACECA countries will designate contact points:

- directly at international border crossing checkpoints along TRACECA routes and
- at central/regional level of relevant authorities or specialized agencies.

As mentioned above, the PS IGC TRACECA will maintain an overall TRACECA Contact Points Directories in all TRACECA countries and TRACECA countries are encouraged to maintain compatible National Contact Points Directories (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 of this document).

Designated contact persons at relevant authorities should endeavor to provide responses to the interested persons best to their knowledge as soon as possible. For the enquires which are not considered as urgent, and where feedback is required, the responses should be given not later than 15 days after receiving the enquiry. The responses should be given directly to the interested persons with copy of the e-mail to the national call center.

The designated contact points will prepare yearly report with general statistics, highlights of achievements and issues experienced in support to the border crossing hotline. The report will be shared with the national call center (to be included in the end of the year report).

F. Processing by specialized investigation authorities of TRACECA countries

The border crossing hotline model envisages designation of contact points (with phone/email) of specialized investigation authorities (e.g., anticorruption, police, Customs internal affairs unit, etc.) in TRACECA countries to support responding to reported issues that may require further investigation (e.g., issues related to corruption, smuggling, irregularities in procedures, unprofessional behavior).

As mentioned above, the PS IGC TRACECA will maintain an overall TRACECA Contact Points Directories in all TRACECA countries and TRACECA countries are encouraged to maintain compatible National Contact Points Directories (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 of this document).

Designated contact points at specialized investigation authorities will make assessment of the level of emergency of the reported issues and take appropriate measures, in accordance with their legal responsibilities.

For the enquiries where feedback has been requested the general response on the course of action should be given not later than 15 days after receiving the enquiry. Designated contact points at authorized bodies will endeavor to provide responses directly to the interested persons with copy of the e-mail to the national call center.

The designated contact points will prepare yearly report with general statistics, highlights of achievements and issues experienced in support to the border crossing hotline. The report will be shared with the national call center (to be included in the end of the year report).

G. Supplementary component (websites, social media, automated chatbots) to the hotlines

PS IGC TRACECA and authorized bodies of the MLA member states will endeavor to provide and regularly update information on their websites relevant for border crossing along TRACECA routes (e.g., international, multilateral and bilateral agreements, national legislation, guidelines, border crossing points details, border crossing requirements, border crossing procedures and documents required etc.).

PS IGC TRACECA and authorized bodies of the MLS member states will endeavor to provide guidance for getting more detailed information and possibilities for making complaints on their social media.

PS IGC TRACECA will develop automated chatbot (on Telegram) that could support the TRACECA border crossing hotline concept by providing information in accordance with the main services elaborated in part C above as far as possible. For initial chatbot development, information on website links, national level hotlines and contact points on border crossing level and central/regional level or specialized agencies should be provided by TRACECA countries (as per information to the Questionnaires given in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 of this document).

Development of national automated chatbots in support of the national border crossing hotlines may be considered.

H. Analysis and follow up actions

Information gathered from both TRACECA level hotline operated by PS IGC TRACECA and national border crossing hotlines operated in TRACECA countries will be regularly analyzed and based on such analysis recommendations for further consideration to responsible parties will be prepared.

Such recommendations may include suggestions for improvement of availability of information and transparency; potential ways for addressing identified issues (e.g., by regulatory changes, infrastructural improvements; information sharing and digitalization; redesigning of business processes for streamlining of border crossing formalities etc.)

Findings and recommendations will be noted at end of the year reports prepared by the responsible authorities operating national call centers at TRACECA countries and by PS IGC TRACECA that will consolidate an overall report and include the findings from national border crossing hotlines.

I. Infrastructure, staffing, equipment

For operation of both TRACECA level hotline operated by PS IGC TRACECA and national border crossing hotlines in TRACECA countries, the following conditions should be provided:

- Facility (room) for the call center;
- Adequate staffing of the call center with operators and supervisor(s);
- Equipment and software for the call center (phone sets, headsets, computers, call distribution systems, call center software, call recording systems, software (tools) for processing of call entries, data bases (websites; contact points; recorded enquires; recorded complaints; unresolved issues; etc.) of statistics and reporting software (tools) etc.)

The requirements for facility, staffing, equipment, etc. necessary for running the call centers could be estimated based on expected call volumes per day. Initially expected call volumes could be assumed as a percentage of average number of vehicles crossing the road borders of the country concerned (total number of trucks, including empty, in both exit and entry direction).

For example, if total number all vehicles that have crossed the border at all international road border crossings of a country in previous year is about 1.000.000, it means that approximately 2,740 vehicles daily are crossing the border in the country. Initially it could be assumed that about 3% of the drivers will call the border crossing hotline, which means that the country in the example given may expect to have approximately and average of 82 calls per day). Since distribution of the calls by the day / time of the day is not equal peaks and low points should be estimated (e.g., for peaks days to have 2 times of the average numbers of calls with 80 % of the calls to be made between 9:00 am and 16:00). The MLA members states should provide data on total number of vehicles crossing the road border in last 2-3 years to make estimations on expected call volumes to the hotline per day. Once the hotline is operational actual call numbers should be analyzed and the call center size and requirements have to be adequately adjusted.

The authorities operating the call center shall make arrangements with national phone service providers on use of special number (e.g., “9797” – *actual number to be agreed additionally*) for calling from fixed and mobile telephone providers (e.g., for free of charge or optionally for discounted – small charge to reduce nonsense calls).

J. Supporting materials, training

Main supporting documents for TRACECA level hotline operated by PS IGC TRACECA are the TRACECA Border Crossing Guide and TRACECA Contact Points Directories (to be developed from Questionnaires given in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 of this document).

Main supporting documents for national border crossing hotlines operated by the leading border crossing agencies at TRACECA countries should be national border crossing guidelines and national contact point directories that have to be developed in each MLA member state with support of relevant agencies (e.g., transport, Customs, border guards, immigration, veterinary, phytosanitary, food safety and other agencies).

It is recommended for national guidelines to cover the main border crossing issues on standardized manner (as per the outline given in Appendix 5 of this document). National guidelines should be regularly updated and expanded (if necessary) by the relevant authorized bodies.

PS IGC TRACECA will compile national guidelines of MLA member states on TRACECA level and support the countries in development of harmonized approach and sharing of best experiences.

Model national standard operational procedures (SOP) including suggested templates for recording enquiries in standardized manner will be developed in line of this concept by PS IGC TRACECA and shared with the countries for further deliberation and support for adopting of national SOPs.

If the same type of equipment and software for the call centers in MLA members states is going to be provided (e.g., based on joint multilateral TRACECA project) a common instruction on use of the equipment and software will be developed.

Training of operators of both TRACECA level hotline operated by PS IGC TRACECA and national border crossing hotlines in TRACECA countries should be organized.

The training of the operators of national hotlines should be organized by the leading border crossing authorities operating the call center (e.g., Customs) in coordination with other relevant

authorities (e.g., transport, Customs, border guards, immigration, veterinary, phytosanitary, food safety and other agencies) in the country.

The training of the operators of call centers shall be based on supporting materials as identified in this part.

K. Promotion of the border crossing hotlines in border zones

For promotion of the border crossing hotlines in border zone areas along TRACECA routes it is recommended to make:

- billboards (to be placed at border zone);
- posters (to be exhibited at the border crossing checkpoint offices / buildings);
- brochures (to be handed over to the drivers at the border crossing).

Making common design of the promotional materials (billboards, posters, brochures) for TRACECA hotline and national hotlines is recommended.

Posts regarding border crossing hotline will be made at the websites and social media of the authorized bodies of MLA member states and PS IGC TRACECA.

L. Testing and backup plans

The border crossing hotlines and the call center systems in PS IGC TRACECA and TRACECA countries have to be tested before official launch to check the functioning of hardware and software of the system; functions for sending text messages (e.g., with website info and contact point info extracted from available data bases); other functionalities of the protocol; the system for recording of the enquiries; reporting functions; etc. Test cases to be developed in accordance with expected real-world scenarios. Potential problems to be identified in testing period and addressed adequately.

Backup and recovery plans to be developed that include creating a backup copy of the call center data; procedures for dealing with calls in the case of the system blackout (e.g., use of paper-based supporting documents and paper-based logs); replacement of operators; etc.

M. Performance assessment and evaluation

It is recommended to develop key performance indicators to be used for performance assessment and evaluation of TRACECA and national border crossing hotlines which include: number of calls per day; waiting time for connecting to the operator; number of repeated calls from same number; call duration; calls handled by operator; number/percentage of transferred calls; number of text messages (with website info / contact points) send; number of complains; number of repeated similar complains; percentage of unresolved issues; outcomes of callers satisfaction queries.

Endeavors to be made to analyze and evaluate performance based on analysis from records of entries (from standardized recording templates) regarding relevant agencies (e.g., transport, Customs, border guards, immigration, veterinary, phytosanitary, food safety and other agencies) and main identified complaints / issues.

Statistics (monthly/yearly) and performance monitoring to be enabled by automated standardized reports from the call center software as much as possible.

The results from performance assessment and evaluation to be reflected in end of the year reports prepared by the national call centers TRACECA countries. PS IGC TRACECA will compile the findings from national call centers and include findings from TRACECA call center.

Findings from performance assessment and evaluation to be used for potential improvements and adjustments in operation protocols of border crossing hotlines, training of operators, supporting materials etc.

N. Potential expansion of border crossing hotlines

Expansion of border crossing hotlines to fully automated phone-answering system service may be considered in a next stage based on initial experience of running the hotline. Fully automated phone-answering system may provide general border crossing information that the clients can select and listen as pre-recorded information or leave a voice message that will be processed subsequently by the operators.

Potential future expansion of the scope of both TRACECA level hotline operated by PS IGC TRACECA and national border crossing hotlines operated in TRACECA countries may include international railway transport and international passenger transport.

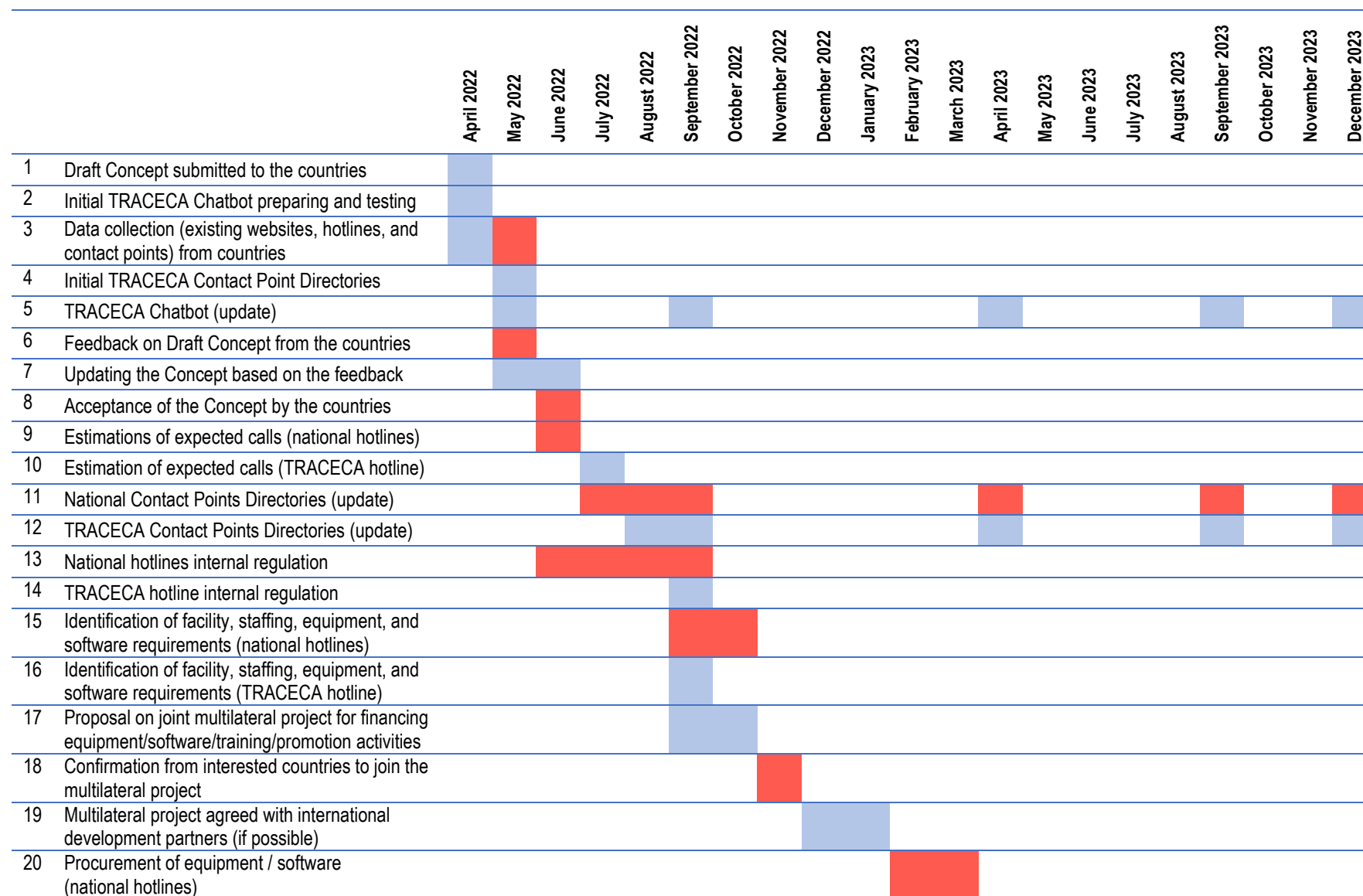
Information on transport service providers, forwarders and logistics service providers, Customs brokers, legal consultants, Embassies etc. may also be added at both TRACECA level hotline operated by PS IGC TRACECA and national border crossing hotlines operated in TRACECA countries.

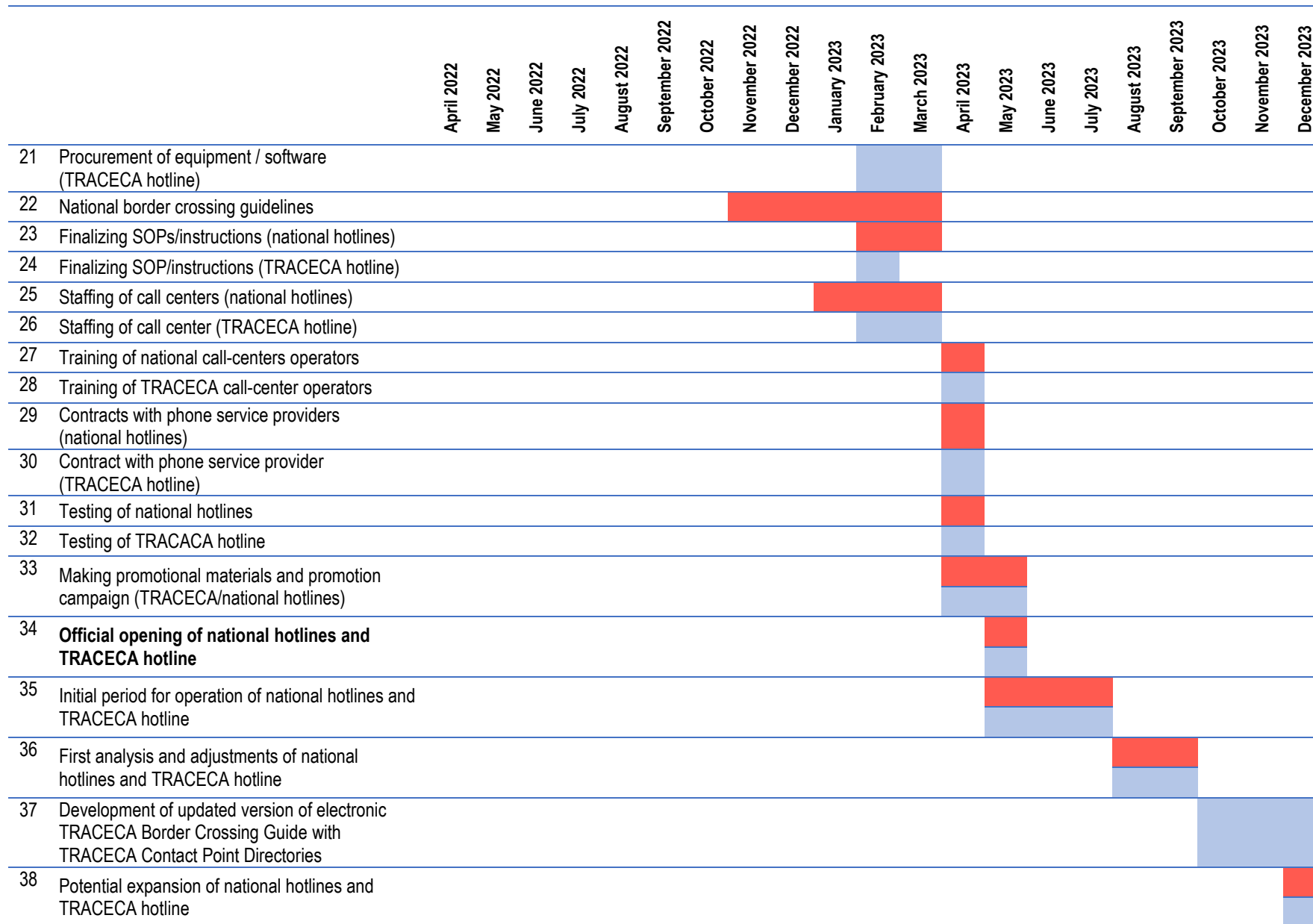
O. Financing

PS IGC TRACECA will explore possibilities for financing of implementation of TRACECA Border Crossing Hotline Concept with support of international development partners. In addition to the financing of TRACECA level component, TRACECA countries may express interest in asking support for financing of national level components of TRACECA Border Crossing Hotline Concept.

With potential joint multilateral TRACECA project on implementation Border Crossing Concept with participation of interested TRACECA countries, support for financing of costs could be explored with regard to: providing of equipment and software for several call centers; joint development of promotional material on border crossing hotline; etc.

Implementation Plan





Legend: ■ Activities of PS IGC TRACECA
■ Activities of TRACECA countries