



Acts of International Organizations on Digital Economic Integration

Name: ZHOU Yong*

OUYANG Zouting (Translator)**

Department of International Law, The Belarusian State University

Email: *frankiezhou953@gmail.com

** elisaouyang97@gmail.com

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
acts; approach digital economic integration; digital trade strategies; international organizations; approach	This paper explores the regulatory frameworks and legal instruments of key international organizations (IOs) in fostering digital economic integration. Through a comparative legal-institutional analysis of acts and policy instruments issued by the United Nations (UN), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), European Union (EU), African Union (AU), and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the study identifies trends, challenges, and synergies in regional and global digital trade governance. The research highlights varying levels of institutional maturity, digital inclusivity, and regulatory harmonization across IOs. The results underscore the importance of interoperable standards and collaborative approaches to bridge regulatory fragmentation and support cohesive digital trade governance worldwide.
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1. Introduction

In an era defined by digital transformation, IOs have become central actors in shaping the legal and policy frameworks that underpin digital trade and economic integration. The rise of cross-border e-commerce, digital payments, and data-driven services has highlighted the need for interoperable legal instruments capable of reducing regulatory fragmentation and supporting inclusive growth. While national governments have advanced domestic regulatory regimes, the complexity of the digital economy requires international cooperation to ensure compatibility across borders. IOs such as the UN, APEC, ASEAN, OECD, EU, AU, and EAEU have each developed distinct approaches to digital economic governance. However, these initiatives vary significantly in terms of institutional maturity, regulatory depth, and enforceability. This study addresses the gap by providing a comparative legal-institutional analysis of key acts and policy instruments adopted by major IOs, identifying common trends, divergences, and implications for the future of digital economic integration.

2. Method

This research adopts a comparative legal-institutional methodology, focusing on official policy documents, legal instruments, and strategic action plans published by international organizations. Primary sources include model laws, regulatory frameworks, and action plans accessed from official IO websites. The comparative analysis is structured along three thematic pillars: legal instruments supporting digital trade, digital infrastructure and interoperability mechanisms, and digital inclusion and governance frameworks. Data were triangulated from academic and policy literature to contextualize findings within broader international trade and legal discourse.

Primary documents were collected directly from the official websites of international organizations, including APEC, ASEAN, OECD, EU, AU, EAEU, and UN. These sources comprised legally binding instruments, policy frameworks, strategic plans, and official declarations published. To ensure reliability, only authentic, publicly available documents from official repositories (e.g., UN Treaty Series, APEC Secretariat, ASEAN Secretariat, OECD Library) were used. Academic literature and secondary sources were identified through databases such as JSTOR and Google Scholar to triangulate findings and provide scholarly context. This ensured that both primary legal texts and secondary analyses were integrated into the comparative study.

3. Discussion

In an era defined by digital transformation, the role of IOs in shaping frameworks for digital trade and economic integration has become pivotal. The UN has implemented several acts to foster digital economic integration. The UN Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) Model Law on Electronic Commerce (1996) provides a harmonized legal framework to facilitate the use of electronic communications in commercial transactions, promoting international trade by ensuring legal recognition of electronic documents (UNCITRAL, 1996; UNCITRAL, 2001). Similarly, the UNCITRAL Model Law on Electronic Signatures (2001) ensures that electronic signatures are legally equivalent to handwritten ones, increasing trust in digital transactions (UNCITRAL, 1996; UNCITRAL, 2001). Additionally, the UN/CEFACT Recommendations, such as Recommendation No. 33 and Recommendation No. 37, streamline trade processes through single-window systems, simplifying digital trade documentation procedures (UN/CEFACT, 2005).

The APEC emphasizes digital trade as essential to achieving regional economic growth and integration. APEC's Digital Economy Action Plan (DEAP) (APEC, 2021) lays a foundation for promoting cross-border e-commerce and facilitating data flows among its member economies. Central to APEC's digital trade policy are initiatives supporting data privacy and cybersecurity, aimed at building trust in cross-border transactions. APEC's Cross-Border Privacy Rules (CBPR) system, for example, harmonizes privacy regulations across participating economies, enabling a freer flow

of data while protecting consumer information. Despite its advancements, APEC faces challenges in implementing uniform digital standards due to the economic diversity of its members (APEC, 2019).

The ASEAN has taken significant strides toward digital economic integration. ASEAN's Digital Integration Framework Action Plan outlines further measures to foster e-commerce growth and enhance digital infrastructure across member states. However, ASEAN's policy implementation remains uneven, as economic disparities and varying regulatory environments among members create obstacles to comprehensive digital integration (ASEAN, 2019). Nonetheless, ASEAN's approach highlights a commitment to advancing digital trade within a development-oriented context, recognizing the role of digitalization in bridging economic divides (ASEAN, 2020).

The OECD has long been at the forefront of digital trade governance, producing influential guidelines and reports on digital economy policies. The OECD's Model Framework on Digital Trade provides a reference for harmonizing digital trade regulations among member states, addressing issues from data governance to tax policy (OECD, 2020). The OECD's analytical contributions often serve as blueprints for other IOs, given the organization's extensive research capacity and policy expertise. However, the OECD faces challenges in promoting policy adoption across diverse legal systems, particularly in non-member states, limiting its impact in emerging economies.

The EU has established one of the world's most comprehensive regulatory frameworks for digital trade through its Digital Single Market (DSM) strategy. The DSM seeks to remove digital barriers within the EU, creating a unified market for digital services and products. Key initiatives include the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which has set a global benchmark for data privacy, and the Digital Services Act, aimed at regulating online platforms and content (EU, 2018). The EU's robust regulatory approach has promoted consumer trust and market accessibility but has also faced criticism for imposing stringent standards that may hinder innovation and complicate trade relations with non-EU countries (EU, 2021). As the EU extends its influence globally, it is actively engaged in promoting data governance standards that align with its digital trade policies.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is an emerging player in digital trade, seeking to harness digitalization to increase intra-African trade and economic development established by AU. Although AfCFTA's digital trade initiatives are still developing, its Secretariat has expressed commitment to building a framework that supports cross-border e-commerce and digital payments across African nations. The AU's Digital Transformation Strategy provides a guiding vision, emphasizing infrastructure, regulatory alignment, and capacity-building. AfCFTA faces considerable challenges in terms of infrastructure and digital literacy, yet its potential impact on reducing trade barriers and promoting economic inclusion across the continent is

profound (African Union, 2020).

The EAEU has been proactive in pursuing digital integration among its member states, guided by the EAEU Digital Agenda. Key initiatives include the development of a common digital platform to streamline cross-border trade and support digital services. The EAEU's approach focuses on aligning member states' digital regulations, facilitating digital payments, and reducing bureaucratic barriers. However, political and economic differences among EAEU members have limited the pace of integration, as member states prioritize different aspects of digital policy based on national interests (Eurasian Economic Commission, 2018). Nonetheless, the EAEU's focus on digital trade underscores its commitment to enhancing economic cooperation in Eurasia.

Beyond describing institutional acts, these initiatives reflect competing governance models. The EU's binding regulatory framework emphasizes consumer protection, while APEC and ASEAN rely more on consensus-based soft law, prioritizing flexibility over enforceability. Such divergence illustrates the tension between harmonization and regulatory sovereignty. Moreover, policy diffusion is evident: the GDPR has become a global reference point, inspiring ASEAN's privacy standards and influencing APEC's CBPR system. However, uneven digital infrastructure in AU and regulatory asymmetry within the EAEU reveal structural challenges that limit the effectiveness of digital integration. These differences demonstrate that while all IOs pursue digital trade, their pathways diverge significantly depending on institutional maturity, member diversity, and political will.

4. Results

This comparative analysis reveals three principal findings. First, international organizations differ in their regulatory strategies: binding law (EU), soft-law cooperation (APEC, ASEAN), and capacity-building (AU, EAEU), with the UN providing a hybrid model through adaptable legal instruments. Second, despite these differences, there is a convergence around interoperability and standards, as all IOs recognize the necessity of cross-border compatibility for digital trade, though implementation levels vary significantly. Third, digital inclusion has become an explicit policy goal, particularly in ASEAN and AU, though practical barriers remain acute.

Taken together, these results underscore that global digital trade governance remains fragmented, but not directionless. IOs are converging around common priorities—data governance, interoperability, and inclusion—yet pursue them through diverse institutional pathways. This diversity reflects regional economic realities but also creates risks of regulatory fragmentation. To overcome this, IOs could strengthen coordination through joint initiatives, interoperability frameworks, and the gradual articulation of shared legal standards.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no competing financial or non-financial interests that could be perceived as influencing the content or outcomes of this research.

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Bio Statement: Zhou Yong is a PhD student in international law at the Belarusian State University, specializing in the study of institutional cooperation in digital trade within APEC. His email address is frankiezhou953@gmail.com,