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Public consultation: New EU system for the avoidance of double taxation and prevention of tax abuse in the field of withholding taxes

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Introduction

Background of this public consultation:

Despite actions already undertaken both at international and European level[1], tax barriers to cross-border investment such as inefficient withholding tax (WHT) procedures still persist within the EU. This is a key reason as to why the Action Plan for fair and simple taxation supporting the recovery and the New Action Plan for a capital markets union for people and businesses strive to address the problem by proposing to explore both legislative and non-legislative initiatives to lower compliance costs for cross-border investors and to prevent tax abuse.

The problems this initiative aims to tackle are the particularly burdensome WHT refund procedures for cross-border investors in the EU and, at the same time, the risks they present in terms of tax abuse.

When an EU resident makes an investment in securities in another EU Member State, the payments received in return (e.g. dividends, interest) are normally subject to WHT in the country of the investment (source country), at a rate which is often higher than the reduced tax rate that should apply to that income on the basis of an applicable bilateral Double Taxation Convention (DTC) or national rules. The non-resident investor can afterwards submit a refund claim of the excess tax withheld by the source country. However, such refund systems for cross-borders securities payments have proved to be demanding, resource-intensive and costly for both investors and tax administrations due to, among other reasons, the lack of digitalization (paper-based processes) and the existence of complicated and different forms across Member States. In addition, there has been an abusive utilization of WHT refund procedures, as recently demonstrated by the 'Cum-Ex' scheme[2], where fraudulent multiple reclaims were requested regarding the same payment of dividend while only one claim should have been made. WHT procedures in general can as well be abused by means of other tax aggressive schemes such as 'Cum-Cum' practices, where a specific set of transactions is agreed between parties in order to fraudulently benefit from a lower or exemption of withholding tax compared to the situation where these transaction would not have taken place.

Relevant definitions for the purposes of this consultation[3]

Source Member State: means the Member State where the issuer of the securities generating income is resident for tax purposes. Residence Member State: means the Member State where the beneficial owner of the securities income resident for tax purposes. Securities Income: means the dividend, interest or other income that securities may generate and that is subject Member withholding in the State. to tax source

Relief at source	system: refers to	a mechanism impler	mented by a tax adm	inistration where the reduced
WHT rate set in the	ne applicable DTC i	s granted directly at	the moment of the pa	ayment (i.e. dividend, interest
etc.)	b y	t h e	WHT	agent.
Refund system:	reference is made	to a mechanism im	nplemented by a tax	administration where the ful
domestic WHT ra	te is applied at the	moment of the paym	nent (i.e. dividend, inte	erest, etc.) and afterwards the
taxpayer can clair	m the refund of the	difference between	the full domestic and	the DTC's reduced WHT rate
Portfolio investo	or: Investors in po	rtfolio investments,	which entails passiv	e or hands-off ownership of
assets as oppos	sed to direct inves	stment, which woul	ld involve a control	ling stake and/or an active
managem	ent		role.	
Beneficial own	er: means the in	vestor who receive	es the securities in	come for his own benefit.
Withholding age	nt: means the pers	son who is required,	under the laws of th	ne source country, to withhold
tax on portfolio in	vestments and rem	it it to the competen	t authority (or other b	ody responsible for accepting
t a x				payments)
Financial interm	ediary: means a ce	entral securities dep	ository, credit instituti	ion or any other authorised o
supervised econo	omic entity in the c	ustody chain betwe	en the issuer of the	securities and the beneficia
o w n e	r .			
Authorized inter	mediaries: are tho	se financial intermed	diaries who have bee	en considered eligible to claim
exemptions or r	educed rates of v	withholding tax on	a pooled basis on	behalf of their customers.
Pooled informat	ion: means informa	ation provided in a fo	ormat which groups s	ecurities income according to

Authorized intermediaries: are those financial intermediaries who have been considered eligible to claim exemptions or reduced rates of withholding tax on a pooled basis on behalf of their customers. **Pooled information**: means information provided in a format which groups securities income according to the withholding tax rate applicable without identifying the owners of the securities. **Tax abuse**: for the purposes of the public consultation this term comprises tax fraud, tax evasion and tax a v o i d a n c e .

Responding to the full questionnaire should take about 15-25 minutes. The questionnaire is available in any official language of the EU.

All stakeholders are invited to provide their views. This includes citizens, national tax administrations, intergovernmental, non-governmental and business organizations, business associations, tax practitioners a n d a c a d e m i c s .

Contributions received are intended for publication "as submitted" on the Commission's websites. In the next section, you have the possibility to indicate whether you agree to the publication of your individual responses under your name or anonymously. In addition to answering the questions, you may upload a brief document (e.g. a position paper) at the end of the questionnaire providing additional information or raising specific points not covered by the below questions.

[1] In 2017, the European Commission published the 'Code of Conduct on Withholding Tax'. Find it in the attached link: https://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/system/files/2017-12 /code_of_conduct_on_witholding_tax.pdf

[2] More information about "cum-ex scandal" can be found on ESMA's (European Securities and Markets Authority) website: https://www.esma.europa.eu/document/preliminary-findings-multiple-withholding-tax-reclaim-schemes

[3] For relevant definitions please check Recommendation 2009 on WHT relief procedures and TRACE IP

About you

^{*}Language of my contribution

Croatian
Czech
Danish
Dutch
English
Estonian
Finnish
French
German
Greek
Hungarian
Irish
Italian
Latvian
Lithuanian
Maltese
Polish
Portuguese
Romanian
Slovak
Slovenian
Spanish
Swedish
*I am giving my contribution as
Academic/research institution
Business association
Company/business organisation
Consumer organisation
EU citizen
Environmental organisation
Non-EU citizen
Non-governmental organisation (NGO)
Public authority
- -

Bulgarian

Trade union			
Other			
*First name			
Marion			
*Surname			
Fontana			
*Email (this won't be p	oublished)		
marion.fontana@etaf.ta	Х		
*Organisation name			
255 character(s) maximum	,		
European Tax Adviser	Federation (ETAF)		
*Organisation size			
Micro (1 to 9 er	nployees)		
Small (10 to 49	employees)		
Medium (50 to	249 employees)		
Large (250 or n	,		
Transparency registe	er number		
255 character(s) maximum			
		<u>er</u> . It's a voluntary database fo	r organisations seeking to
influence EU decision-makin	ng.		
760084520382-92			
*Country of origin			
Please add your country of	origin, or that of your organi	sation.	
Afghanistan	Djibouti	Libya	Saint Martin
Aland Islands	Dominica	Liechtenstein	Saint Pierre and Miquelon
Albania	DominicanRepublic	Lithuania	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

	Algeria	0	Ecuador		Luxembourg		Samoa
	American Samoa	0	Egypt		Macau		San Marino
	Andorra	0	El Salvador		Madagascar		São Tomé and
							Príncipe
	Angola	0	Equatorial Guinea	a	Malawi		Saudi Arabia
	Anguilla	0	Eritrea		Malaysia		Senegal
	Antarctica		Estonia		Maldives		Serbia
0	Antigua and Barbuda	0	Eswatini		Mali	0	Seychelles
	Argentina		Ethiopia		Malta		Sierra Leone
	Armenia		Falkland Islands		Marshall Islands		Singapore
	Aruba		Faroe Islands		Martinique		Sint Maarten
	Australia		Fiji		Mauritania		Slovakia
	Austria		Finland		Mauritius		Slovenia
	Azerbaijan		France		Mayotte		Solomon Islands
	Bahamas		French Guiana		Mexico		Somalia
	Bahrain		French Polynesia		Micronesia		South Africa
	Bangladesh		French Southern		Moldova		South Georgia
			and Antarctic				and the South
			Lands				Sandwich
							Islands
	Barbados	0	Gabon		Monaco		South Korea
	Belarus		Georgia		Mongolia		South Sudan
0	Belgium	0	Germany		Montenegro	0	Spain
	Belize		Ghana		Montserrat		Sri Lanka
	Benin	0	Gibraltar		Morocco		Sudan
	Bermuda	0	Greece		Mozambique		Suriname
	Bhutan	0	Greenland		Myanmar/Burma		Svalbard and
							Jan Mayen
0	Bolivia	0	Grenada	0	Namibia	0	Sweden
0	Bonaire Saint	0	Guadeloupe		Nauru	0	Switzerland
	Eustatius and						
0	Saba	6					
	Bosnia and Herzegovina		Guam		Nepal	(C)	Syria

0	Botswana		Guatemala	0	Netherlands	0	Taiwan
	Bouvet Island		Guernsey		New Caledonia	0	Tajikistan
	Brazil		Guinea		New Zealand	0	Tanzania
0	British Indian		Guinea-Bissau	0	Nicaragua	0	Thailand
	Ocean Territory	_				_	
0	British Virgin	0	Guyana	0	Niger	0	The Gambia
	Islands					_	
0	Brunei	0	Haiti	0	Nigeria	0	Timor-Leste
	Bulgaria		Heard Island and		Niue	0	Togo
			McDonald Islands	3			
	Burkina Faso	0	Honduras		Norfolk Island	0	Tokelau
	Burundi		Hong Kong		Northern	0	Tonga
					Mariana Islands		
	Cambodia		Hungary		North Korea	0	Trinidad and
							Tobago
	Cameroon		Iceland		North Macedonia	0	Tunisia
	Canada		India		Norway	0	Turkey
	Cape Verde		Indonesia		Oman	0	Turkmenistan
	Cayman Islands	0	Iran		Pakistan	0	Turks and
	-						Caicos Islands
	Central African		Iraq		Palau	0	Tuvalu
	Republic		·				
	Chad		Ireland		Palestine	0	Uganda
0	Chile		Isle of Man	0	Panama	0	Ukraine
0	China	0	Israel		Papua New	0	United Arab
					Guinea		Emirates
0	Christmas Island	0	Italy		Paraguay	0	United Kingdom
0	Clipperton	0	Jamaica	0	Peru	0	United States
0	Cocos (Keeling)	0	Japan	0	Philippines	0	United States
	Islands						Minor Outlying
							Islands
0	Colombia	0	Jersey	0	Pitcairn Islands	0	Uruguay
0	Comoros	0	Jordan	0	Poland	0	US Virgin Islands
0	Congo	0	Kazakhstan	0	Portugal	0	Uzbekistan
0	Cook Islands	0	Kenya	0	Puerto Rico	0	Vanuatu

0	Costa Rica	Kiribati	Qatar		Vatican City
	Côte d'Ivoire	Kosovo	Réunion		Venezuela
0	Croatia	Kuwait	Romania		Vietnam
0	Cuba	Kyrgyzstan	Russia		Wallis and
					Futuna
	Curaçao	Laos	Rwanda		Western Sahara
0	Cyprus	Latvia	Saint Barthélemy		Yemen
	Czechia	Lebanon	Saint Helena		Zambia
			Ascension and		
			Tristan da Cunha	l	
	Democratic	Lesotho	Saint Kitts and		Zimbabwe
	Republic of the		Nevis		
	Congo				
	Denmark	Liberia	Saint Lucia		

The Commission will publish all contributions to this public consultation. You can choose whether you would prefer to have your details published or to remain anonymous when your contribution is published. Fo r the purpose of transparency, the type of respondent (for example, 'business association, 'consumer association', 'EU citizen') country of origin, organisation name and size, and its transparency register number, are always published. Your e-mail address will never be published. Opt in to select the privacy option that best suits you. Privacy options default based on the type of respondent selected

*Contribution publication privacy settings

The Commission will publish the responses to this public consultation. You can choose whether you would like your details to be made public or to remain anonymous.

Anonymous

Only organisation details are published: The type of respondent that you responded to this consultation as, the name of the organisation on whose behalf you reply as well as its transparency number, its size, its country of origin and your contribution will be published as received. Your name will not be published. Please do not include any personal data in the contribution itself if you want to remain anonymous.

Public

Organisation details and respondent details are published: The type of respondent that you responded to this consultation as, the name of the organisation on whose behalf you reply as well as its transparency number, its size, its country of origin and your contribution will be published. Your name will also be published.

I agree with the personal data protection provisions

Once the consultation period is over, the European Commission will prepare a report summarizing the responses. Would you like to be informed when the report is published?

0	Yes
	163

O No

I. Issue at stake

- 1. Do you think that the current functioning of withholding tax refund procedures in Member States hinders cross-border investment in the EU securities market?
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Agree to some extent
 - Do not agree
 - Don't know
- 2. For which of the following payments, do you think that the issue of inefficient WHT procedures is relevant: (Multiple options are available)

Nature of the cross-border payment	Check the box where applicable
Dividends from listed companies	V
Dividends from unlisted companies	V
Interests related to debt instruments in listed companies	V
Interests related to debt instruments in unlisted companies	V
Royalties	V
Other	

3. What is in your opinion the nature of the problems with existing WHT refund procedures? (Multiple options are available. Please qualify your answer by clicking in the grid)

Nature of the problem	Low importance	Medium importance	High importance
Lack of knowledge by the investor about the existence of refund procedures and/or mechanism available to claim the refund		V	

Lack of digitalization in WHT procedures and non user- friendly forms			V
Lengthy WHT refund procedures			V
Costly WHT refund procedures in monetary terms (administrative and opportunity costs included)			V
Country of investment does not accept tax residence certificates from the residence state		V	
Conflict on tax residency	V		
Country of investment requires information which the investor is unable to deliver		V	
Other			

4. What are in your view the consequences of the problems encountered with WHT refund procedures? (Multiple options are available. Please qualify your answer by clicking in the grid)

Consequences	Low importance	Medium importance	High importance
Delays in effectively receiving the excessive WHT refund			V
High compliance costs associated with the WHT refund procedures			V
Giving up the right of submitting WHT refund claims			V
High opportunity costs due to the delay in receiving the WHT refunds			V
Permanent double taxation suffered			V
High risk that the system is abused			V
Other			

5. In January 2016, the overall cost of WHT refund procedures was estimated at EUR 8.4 billion per year [4]. Are you aware of any study or estimate of the cost of WHT refund incurred per year on aggregated basis at EU or national level from academic or official source (Please, indicate the source)?

Υ	e	S
	v	u

No

^[4] https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/170227-report-capital-barriers_en.pdf

- 6. Have you ever invested in securities (debt or equity) in an EU country different from your home country?
 - Yes, regularly
 - Yes, occasionally
 - No, never
 - Don't know

II. Need for EU action

- 15. Several EU countries have now introduced (or are planning to introduce) enhanced procedures to make WHT procedures more efficient. In this context, do you think that there is a need for EU action in order to make WHT refund/relief procedures more efficient?
 - Strongly support
 - Support
 - Support to some extend
 - Do not support
 - Don't know
- 16. What would be the added value of an action at EU level, compared to actions taken by Member States? (i.e. harmonized system, single set of standardized forms, common procedures, etc.)?
 - High added value as there would be an EU wide harmonized framework in place (no more fragmented WHT systems across the EU)
 - Medium value
 - Low added value as an EU wide harmonized framework is not needed
 - No added value
 - Don't know

Please, provide a further explanation of the reply given

The European Tax Adviser Federation (ETAF) welcomes the European Commission's initiative to establish a European withholding tax framework. In principle, ETAF acknowledges that withholding taxes as such can reduce the risk of tax evasion and avoidance. However, currently, refund procedures are often complex, lengthy and costly and can even more discourage investors from making investments in certain countries or having to accept double taxation, which can not be the intention of the Single Market. For this reason, ETAF is in favour of harmonised systems of tax relief at source.

III. Policy options

- 17. As an investor, which mechanism would you prefer to have in place across the EU to obtain the return on your cross-border investment from securities?
 - Preference for a harmonized relief at source system [6] (hereby the reduced WHT rate over dividends, interests, etc. is applied directly by the issuer of the securities/financial institution)
 - Preference for a harmonised and more efficient refund procedure system (whereby the issuer of the securities/financial institution applies the domestic WHT rate and then the investor claims the refund of the excessive tax withheld)
 - Preference for putting in place a combination of both previous mechanisms
 - No preference for one or the other system, provided that current system is not burdensome and that it is efficient
 - Other

[6] A relief at source system would mirror TRACE model ('treaty relief and compliance enhancement'). Find more information in the <u>link</u>: https://www.oecd.org/ctp/exchange-of-tax-information/aboutthetracegroup.htm

- 18. As a financial intermediary, which mechanism would you prefer to have in place across EU to manage the return on your clients' investments in order to remove barriers to cross-border investment?
 - Current system with different national procedures in place
 - Harmonized system of relief at source
 - Harmonized system of improved refund procedures
 - A combination of the above systems (relief at source and refund system)
 - Other
- 19. As tax administration, which mechanism would you prefer to have in place across EU for non-resident investors receive the return on their investment:
 - Current system with different national procedures in place
 - Harmonized system of relief at source
 - Harmonized system of improved refund procedures
 - A combination of the above systems (relief at source and refund system)
 - Other
- III.A. Improving withholding tax refund procedures

20. In case the EU initiative consists of simplifying and streamlining the WHT refund procedures, which measures do you think will be more effective to achieve these goals? (Multiple options are available)

Nature of the solution provided	Check the box where applicable
Standardized and same language forms for refund requests across Member States' tax administrations	•
Central repository at EU level to store tax residence certificates issued by Member States' tax administrations	0
E-request of tax residence certificate (swift online provision of the tax residence certificate) and digitalized verification system	•
Obligation of digitalizing the WHT refund procedures by every Member States' tax administrations (E-filing of tax reclaim, online website to monitor refund status, e-document sharing, online communication of the outcome, etc.)	
Single web-portal (one-stop shop) where an investor could log in and make a refund claim irrespective of the source MS, based on standardized forms	•
Allowing alternative ways of proving tax residence (i.e. investor self-declaration)	
Accruing interest in case of delays on getting the refund back under a limited period for handling the WHT reclaim	
Issuing digital passport to attest investor's entitlement to tax treaty benefits for a period of time	•
Refund claim made on the investor's residence country instead of on the country of the investment	•

Explain below any other mechanism you consider appropriate to streamline th refund processes.	е

- 22. Who should make the refund claim to the investment country?
 - Only the non-resident investor
 - Besides the non-resident investor, the financial intermediary should have the opportunity to make the refund claim on behalf of the non-resident investor in case by case basis

Besides the non-resident investor, the financial intermediary should have the opportunity to make the refund claim on behalf of the non-resident investor in bulk basis

III.B. Establishing a common EU relief at source system

23. Which payments do you think should be covered under a potential EU relief at source system?

Nature of the cross-border payment	Check the box where applicable
Dividends from listed companies	0
Dividends in general	0
Dividends and interest	0
Dividends, interest, royalties, other passive income payments	•
Other	0

- 24. There are countries where the relief at source system is just used for low risk payments (i.e. payments below EUR 10.000 and above 15% withholding tax rate). Do you think that a relief at source system should cover both low and high-risk payments without any threshold in terms of amount/rate or should it be used only for low-risk situations?
 - Fully fledged relief at source system (covering both low and high-risk payments)
 - Relief at source system covering only low-risk payments
- 25. What do you consider as low-risk payment in the context of a relief at source system?
 - Payment where the withholding tax rate to be applied is above 5%
 - Payment where the withholding tax rate to be applied is above 10%
 - Payment where the withholding tax rate to be applied is above 15%.
 - A joint limit of minimum withholding tax rate and maximum amount of payment

If you choose the last option, please indicate the most suitable amount:

In principle, we believe that a potential EU relief at source system should apply to all payments, not only to those with a low risk. Should this be restricted to prevent possible abuses, we consider that payments up to at least 10 000 € could be classified as low-risk payments.

- 26. Which investors do you think should benefit from a potential relief at source system: cross-border investors from EU Member States or investors from non-EU Member States as well?
 - Only cross-border investors from EU Member States
 - Investors from both EU and non-EU Member States
- 27. Who should be the entities obliged to report the relevant information on the correct WHT rate to be levied on the dividend payment (or other passive income payments) to the withholding agent: only EU financial intermediaries or both EU and non-EU financial intermediaries?
 - Only EU financial intermediaries
 - Both EU and non-EU financial intermediaries

[7] as far as there is automatic exchange of information and mutual assistance in place between the relevant non-EU country and the EU source country

- 28. What would be the preferred or best way to establish authorized intermediaries in a relief at source system?
 - By way of a request by the financial intermediary and explicit approval by the tax administration
 - By way of registering in a public EU register of authorized intermediaries without explicit prior approval by the tax authorities

III.C. Enhancing existing administrative cooperation framework

- 29. Do you think that it would be appropriate to broaden the administrative cooperation framework in the EU (based on the Directive on administrative cooperation DAC) to include the automatic exchange of additional financial information related to the payments received
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Agree to some extent
 - Do not agree
 - Don't know

[8] DAC2 already comprises as reporting items the amount of dividend received in the holder account. Conversely, it does not comprise any additional relevant data for the correct checking of refund/relief procedures (e.g. WHT agent, intermediaries in the financial chain, gross dividend paid, date of payment, etc.)

- 31. Who should be the entities bound to report the relevant information on the payment made to the investor: only EU financial intermediaries or both EU and non-EU financial intermediaries?
 - Only EU financial intermediaries
 - Both EU and non-EU financial intermediaries
- 32. In which country should the relevant information be reported by the financial intermediary closest to the investor (multiple option are available)?
 - The residence country of the investor
 - The residence country of the financial intermediary
 - The source country of the investment
- 33. According to works at <u>international</u> and <u>EU</u> level in this field, it is relevant to report the following information in order to achieve the goal of ensuring tax treaty benefits entitlement: the identification information and treaty residence status of the beneficial owners of the income paid and the nature and amount of income earned by those investors. Do you agree with this approach?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Don't know
- 34. What do you suggest to ensure that exchanges of information between relevant authorities is as efficient as possible?
 - To include it as a new reporting item of the already standardized process of automatic information exchange established at international and EU level (Common reporting standard – CRS, DAC2)
 - As part of another separate mechanism

IV. Combating Tax Abuse

Combating tax abuse is one of the main goals of this initiative. Bearing this in mind we would like to hear your views on which system would be best suited to fight against any kind of tax abuse. The question of who should be held liable in case of flaws or incorrect information in any of the systems eventually implemented plays a crucial part to minimize or avoid failures in compliance. Therefore, we would like to hear your opinion on who should be accountable in case of any underreporting during WHT procedures in order to avoid tax abuse and loss of tax revenue.

35. Which of the above mentioned options would be most effective in tackling tax abuse regarding withholding taxes:

- An improved refund procedure system (section III.A)
- An EU-wide relief at source system (section III.B)
- Enhanced automatic exchange of information (section III.C)
- A combination of the above options
- 36. What other options do you deem helpful to prevent or combat tax abuse. Please explain:

In order to reduce the incentives for undesired tax abuse, we consider it crucial to radically reduce the complexity of tax law. The complex cross-border issues should be addressed with a tax framework that is as simple as possible and thus less subject to tax planning.

- 37. Under the option of an improved refund system, in case the financial intermediary makes the refund claim on behalf of the non-resident investor, who should be liable in case of any underreporting to the investment country?
 - Financial intermediary making the refund claim on behalf of its client
 - Non-resident investor (final investor)
 - Other
- 38. Under the option of an EU-wide relief at source system, do you think that authorized intermediaries [9] should be liable for any underreporting of WHT or should authorised intermediaries only be liable when they did not carry out all reasonable actions to properly verify the investor's entitlement to the tax treaty benefit?

[9] The authorized intermediary closest to the investor is considered the best placed to check non-resident investor's identification (via KYC and AML due diligence), hence, he would normally be deemed liable under a relief at source system

- Liable for any underreporting detected
- Liable for underreporting when acting without due diligence

Final remark

Should you wish to provide additional information (for example a position paper) or raise specific points not covered by the questionnaire, you can upload your additional document here.

Please upload your file(s)

Only files of the type pdf,txt,doc,docx,odt,rtf are allowed

Contact

Lourdes.BUSTOS1@ec.europa.eu