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Central Asia and Europe: a New Economic Partnership for the 21st Century



Federal Foreign Minister of Germany and Vice Chancellor Dr. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, European Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner and Executive Secretary Marek Belka at the SPECA Berlin Forum.

The Second Meeting of the 2007 United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) Economic Forum was co-organized by the UNECE and the Government of Germany on 13 November in Berlin in the form of the Conference “Central Asia and Europe: a New Economic Partnership for the 21st Century”. The First Meeting of the Forum “Focus on Asia” was held last May in Almaty.

Some 200 high-level participants representing the Governments of all seven SPECA Member Countries, the Government of Germany, the European Union, the UN, international and regional organizations, international financial institutions, the private sector and the research community took part in the Conference.

Executive Secretary Marek Belka in his opening statement emphasized that in 2006 Central Asia was the fastest growing region of Eurasia. At the same time, even though Central Asia lies at the centre of the Eurasian Continent, less than 1% of all trade between Europe and Asia currently goes through the region. The UNECE – working closely with UNESCAP in the SPECA framework – effectively promotes regional cooperation, which is an important precondition of a dynamic and future-oriented partnership between Central Asia and Europe.

Federal Foreign Minister of Germany Dr. Frank-Walter Steinmeier in his opening address spoke about the contribution of the German EU Presidency to the elaboration of the new Central Asia Strategy of the European Union. The Government of Germany remains committed to developing a strong economic partnership between Europe and the region. He reminded participants that strengthened regional cooperation is an important precondition of sustained economic development and stability in Central Asia.

H.H. Prince Karim Aga Khan in his keynote address emphasized that the main objective of the Aga Khan Development Network in Central Asia is the reduction of poverty. The University of Central Asia was established by the AKDN among others to foster inter-cultural dialogue.

European External Affairs Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner laid out detailed plans of the European Commission to implement the Central Asia Strategy adopted last June. She called on the EBRD and EIB to play a more active role in Central Asia. Ambassador Pierre Morel, Special Representative of the European Union for Central Asia and Ambassador Manuel Curto, Special Representative of the Portuguese EU Presidency for Central Asia, also spoke about the role of the Strategy in developing a close partnership between Central Asia and Europe.

Heads of Delegations of SPECA Member Countries welcomed the EU’s Central Asia Strategy and encouraged the European Union to work closely with the UN and its partner organizations in the region.

Representatives of the private sector reminded participants that the total volume of trade between Germany and Central Asia, a region of 60 million inhabitants, is about 60 million Euros – the same as trade with Slovenia, a country of 2 million. There is a huge potential for further growth. Mr. Mehdorn, CEO of the German Railroads emphasized that high-capacity rail-links between Europe and Central Asia will be feasible only if there are enough goods to carry to and from the region.

Representatives of the EBRD, UNDP and ADB spoke about the necessity to develop closer coordination and cooperation among members of the international development community and regional organizations in Central Asia.

A group of researchers from SPECA Member Countries presented a regional study – sponsored by the UNECE and UNDP – on how technical assistance can more effectively contribute to regional economic cooperation and through it a better business and investment climate.

Several other SPECA events – the Second Session of the Governing Council, the meeting of the Project Working Group on Trade and the third (Ad Hoc) Meeting on the SPECA Project Working Group on Gender and Economy – took place before and after the Conference in Berlin. ✕

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Mobilizing women's economic potential in Central Asia

The Third (Ad hoc) meeting of the SPECA Project Working Group on Gender and Economy (PWG) discussed how to mobilize women's economic potential in countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus through establishing gender-sensitive economic policies and building partnership with the private sector. The meeting was hosted by the German Ministry of Economics and Technology and was part of a series of events organized by UNECE and the German Government on Central Asia in Berlin on 12-14 November.

In his opening remarks, Executive Secretary Marek Belka underlined that equality of economic opportunities is a pillar of a modern growth strategy and stressed the need to work with men, be practical and result oriented. Training for managers in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, supported by the German Government, could be one such example, said Ms. Gudrun Kochendörfer-Lucius, Managing Director of Invent. "A gender perspective is also relevant to the work of the Ministry of Economics and Technology," said Ms. Wülker-Mirbach, Head of Division. The discussion was based on presentations from members of the PWG representing Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan as well as the UNDP office (Kazakhstan), and focused on women's entrepreneurship, gender budget and the role of stakeholders, including parliamentarians and the private sector, in promoting gender equality as "smart economics". The value of drawing on the experiences of other countries in Asia was underlined by Mr Raj Kumar, Principal Officer, UNESCAP.

The conclusions from the meeting were presented at the SPECA Governing Council by the PWG co-chairs, Ms. Aitkul Samakova, Member of Parliament of Kazakhstan and Ms. Hirjan Huseynova, Chair, State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Issues under the President of Azerbaijan, in the context of a work plan for 2008, which includes an assessment of the business environment for women entrepreneurs in rural and urban areas in two pilot countries (in cooperation with ILO), preparation of a manual on gender budgets (in cooperation with the Council of Europe), establishment of a knowledge-hub on good practices in gender-sensitive economic policies and capacity building workshops supported by the Government of Israel. ✕

Internet Governance Forum

The Second Meeting of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) took place in Rio de Janeiro on 12-15 November, attended by more than 1300 participants from 109 countries. The host country Brazil put strong emphasis on the meeting and no fewer than four Ministers (strategic affairs, science and technology, communications, and culture) participated in the plenary sessions. The UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, Mr. Sha Zukang, read a message from the Secretary-General emphasizing the opportunities that Internet can offer.

Two major themes dominated the discussions. The first dealt with access and what IGF can do for the billions of people who do not yet have access. The second theme was focused around the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). Several participants criticised the fact that ICANN is controlled by a single government.

Regional Commissions Open Forum

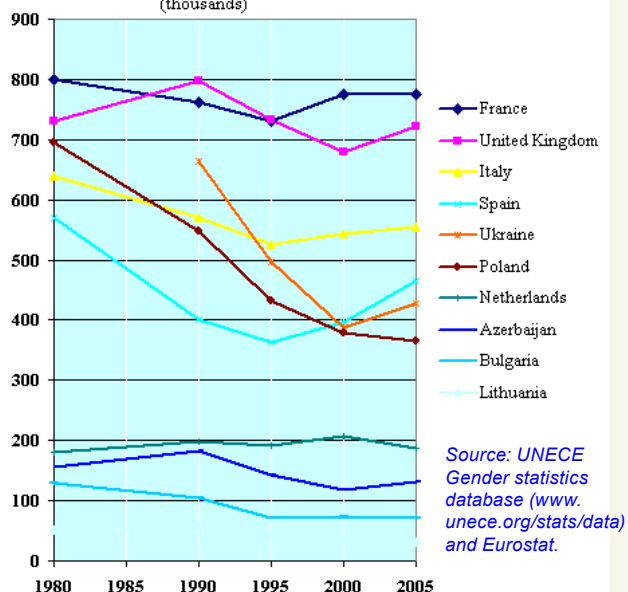
Each Regional Commission presented its respective situation with regard to Internet development and governance. It was recognized and noted that the UNECE region comprises more than the western developed countries and that many transition countries share similar problems with the other regions regarding access, connectivity and costs. Clearly the issue of access is a common challenge for all regions.

Best Practice Forum

A best practice forum on public participation in Internet governance and access to information was co-organized by UNECE, the Council of Europe and the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). The Forum explored which tools, online and offline, could be available for public participation in Internet governance. On this occasion, the "Aarhus Convention" was presented as a suggestive model of such a mechanism from which lessons could be learned. A debate followed and great interest was expressed in the Aarhus Convention. ✕

Facts and Figures

Births per year, 1980-2005
(thousands)



After a long decline, the number of births recovers in some UNECE countries

Over the last 25 years the number of births has declined in many UNECE countries, in some cases quite strikingly, as the chart attests. Decreasing fertility, coupled in some countries with smaller cohorts of women in reproductive ages, played a major role in the falling numbers of births. In the East European countries, the economic crisis of the early 1990s and transition-aggravated shortages of social welfare structures (poorly financed maternity needs, closed down kindergartens, etc.) also contributed.

In the last few years, however, the decline has slowed down, and in several UNECE countries

the trend has been reversed. The change came about as fertility levels picked up, if only slightly, in the early 2000s – a trend observed at least in a third of the UNECE countries (France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom, also Azerbaijan and Ukraine in the sample, see UNECE Weekly N° 217). Some recent changes in the population structure, often influenced by immigration – immigrants are generally concentrated in reproductive ages and also tend to have relatively higher fertility rates – played a role. The increasing number of births in Italy and Spain, for instance, is mainly due to the contribution of immigrants. ✕