

Translation

Opening Address by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs,
at the conference on "Central Asia and Europe: A new Economic Partnership
for the 21st Century"
Berlin, 13 November 2007

Colleagues,
dear Benita,
Dr Belka,
Ambassador Morel,
Ambassador Curto,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Almost exactly one year ago I was honoured to be the first European foreign minister to visit all five Central Asian countries.

I was able to spend a week getting to know your region, and I want to take this opportunity to warmly thank all of you once again for your hospitality. I am very pleased to see that you have come to Berlin to be our guests today!

During my visit last year, in preparation for Germany's EU Presidency, I proposed that Europe and Central Asia revive their centuries-old contacts and relations, their mutual fruitful exchange and learning from one another, in all fields.

I can state today that I'm happy we kept our word. Germany's EU Presidency, during the first half of this year, launched a Central Asia Strategy. We want to give the Silk Road a new lease of life.

Together with our Central Asian partners we identified the fields in which we want to intensify our cooperation and, in the EU, we backed up that commitment financially. The European Commission, dear Benita, played a special role in this. All of us here thank you for your efforts, and we look forward to hearing your views!

Let me underline, as a kind of retrospective on a year of joint work, that we have taken this route in a spirit of partnership and that along the way we have found new partners.

For example, I would like to give special thanks to His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan, whom I was able to meet yesterday evening, and who this year celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of his Imamate. Not only has he for many years carried out important reconstruction work in Central Asia and Afghanistan through the Aga Khan Development Network, but at the same time he has in many ways been an example, an advisor and a partner due to his experience, commitment and power of conviction.

Let me also warmly welcome Ambassador Pierre Morel, the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, who plays a vital role in Europe's engagement in the region.

My special gratitude also goes to UNECE and Dr Marek Belka for their close cooperation in organizing today's conference.

But above all I want to thank our partners from business and civic society, InWent, the Committee on Eastern Economic Relations and Roland Berger Consulting for their support. Your presence here and that of the numerous representatives of German business underlines impressively how much broader the base of partnership between Europe and Central Asia has become. We want to use that base as a foundation on which we can jointly build our house!

This is precisely the purpose of today's conference, as it helps to elaborate joint methods of intensifying our partnership through economic cooperation.

The potential of that cooperation is tangible. Central Asia is one of the world's most dynamic regions. Its economies have for years now been growing at an average of 10%. A market of almost 60 million consumers, Central Asia is increasing in importance. Even now EU-Central Asia trade amounts to over 20 billion euro per year, and in view of the tasks ahead, whether they be in the infrastructure or energy fields, this is only the beginning.

In this regard, developing the infrastructure field is a priority task we are shouldering with the help of the EU. This benefits the entire region. Further massive investment is needed, and we hope that Central Asia will once again become the main corridor between Europe and East and South Asia.

Of course, for this to happen it is vital that the high trade barriers be dismantled. Only then can Central Asia be successfully integrated into the global economy. Let me repeat my assurance that Germany supports the Central Asian countries' desire for WTO membership. We are ready to help you undertake the necessary trade-law and customs-law reforms.

This is because here, too, we want Central Asia to reassume its proper position.

This is, by the way, in our own European interests, since Central Asia, with its huge oil and gas reserves, plays an ever-greater part in the diversification of Europe's energy supplies. The European Baku Initiative is designed to help better harmonize energy markets and develop the necessary energy infrastructure. Our shared objective is the creation of an additional energy transport corridor between the Caspian region and the EU.

Let me use energy to underline one issue I regard as important from our specifically European viewpoint: regional political cooperation and economic linkages are the best way of achieving political stability and prosperity for the people of our countries. Our European experience shows that both are inextricably linked. Cooperation creates stability and growth, beyond national interests, and we Europeans want to not only inform our partners about these experiences but to share them with you.

This is why we are for example engaged in work on harmonizing economic law. This is the vital basis for a common market and thus for greater economic cooperation. This is why we Europeans are trying to assist you in this and many other fields, based on our own transformation experiences, in tackling the difficult transition towards a market economy in Central Asia.

This first of all means legal security. This is the basis for business confidence, but also for citizens' trust in the state. The sanctity of concluded agreements, the independence of justice, the transparency of administration – cooperation depends on all of these, and in the final analysis the necessary trust cannot exist without them.

For many years now Germany, in close cooperation with the EU Commission and with you, Ambassador Morel, has successfully supported the creation of a modern legal system in Central Asia. I need only mention here the GTZ's legal advice centre in Tashkent which opened at the beginning of this year. We are prepared to also assume a responsible role within

the scope of the EU's new Rule of Law Initiative for Central Asia. Allow me to mention a third point on which we are especially committed, i.e. the cooperative use of natural resources. One of the biggest challenges of the 21st century is to prevent access to natural resources becoming the cause of political conflicts. This applies to energy, to Central Asia in particular, but also to regional water management.

Water and security – these terms are synonyms, particularly in Central Asia, and climate change and, as a result, water shortage in some Central Asian regions is likely to be one of the politically most explosive issues – if it isn't already. The Central Asia Strategy makes useful suggestions on how Europe and the Central Asian countries can cooperate in order to ensure the better use, fairer distribution and greater protection of our scarce water resources. It is one of the most urgent tasks for the EU and indeed for my country to back up these efforts with concrete arrangements, and I can assure you that even after this conference ends we Germans will remain engaged on this issue together with the German water industry. We want to harness our companies' and scientists' technical know-how, our experience in cross-border water management, and our industrial capacities for this purpose.

Allow me to close by mentioning one subject which particularly impressed me during my trip a year ago and which I feel is especially important for our shared future:

Anyone who has stood before one of the many ancient madrassas in Central Asia, and who has even a little prior knowledge of the scientific discoveries made there centuries ago, will give education and training a whole new priority.

The Silk Road once brought technologies like the compass or paper to Europe, and all of us here today know that in the 21st century, too, there can be no economic growth, no societal equality and no political participation without education.

In my opinion it is therefore all the more regrettable that in this regard cooperation is still in its infancy, especially in the field of vocational training. Here, perhaps to a greater extent than in other fields, we need the joint engagement of private enterprise and the state!

But here, too, we have at least made the first steps and, for example with our further-training programme for managers in Kazakhstan, we have made good progress. So much so in fact that we want to extend this programme to other countries this year. I strongly welcome the idea of a management school for Central Asia, and as German foreign minister I of course place special hopes on the German-Kazakh University in Almaty. I can announce today that

we intend to greatly expand the number of courses for students from across Central Asia, particularly in the business field, and that we want to introduce new courses on European themes both there and at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek.

All of us have made it our mission to actively shape globalization to the benefit of our countries and peoples, and in doing so flesh out the partnership between Central Asia and Europe. I'm sure that today's conference will provide a major contribution towards that goal, and I wish you and all of us every success!