Central Asia: Conference Asks What Lessons Can Region Learn From EU

By Breffni O'Rourke

- The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe is holding a conference in Almaty this week on the subject of whether the European Union can serve as a model of economic integration for Central Asia. The aim of the conference is to stimulate debate on how the Central Asian states can benefit though mutual economic cooperation based on the European experience.
- Prague, 5 March 2003 (RFE/RL) -- For more than 50 years now the European Union has been working to increase the level of economic cooperation among its member states.
- The most spectacular example of this integration in recent years is the introduction of the euro common currency among 12 EU members. Now, from Lappland on the Arctic Circle to Palermo in Sicily the money in people's pockets is the same.
- The advantages to international business of having the common currency euro-zone are obvious. But that is only one of thousands of steps taken by the EU toward economic integration. Many are unspectacular changes such as the harmonization of trade rules. But they all contribute to making a huge single market that has raised the living standards of several hundreds of millions of people.
- Now the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has organized a conference in Almaty, Kazakhstan, to discuss how some of the lessons learned in the EU can be applied in the Central Asian region. The economic officer of the OSCE center in Almaty, Armands Pupols, explained: "The aim of the conference is to show, and to give information, on how the various integration processes worked in the European Union, and to illustrate what kind of difficulties the current EU members and the potential [Eastern European] members face, and how these difficulties were solved."
- The one-day conference is being attended by EU and other officials, experts from Central Asia and Europe, plus academics. After the conference, speakers will be going to universities in Almaty to inform students.
- But Central Asia is a quite different region from Europe, and the question arises as to whether much of the European experience is transferable to Asia. Gabriel von

Toggenburg explained that the impulse for the unification of Europe came after the devastation of World War II, when there was a wide recognition of the dangers posed by excessive nationalism. "The motivation for the European Union countries, the European communities, to integrate was also in the form of a certain political pressure, because at that time France and Germany and the Benelux states were encouraged to cooperate because that was one of the conditions set by the United

States, that the European states start cooperating among each other or else they would not receive the money in the Marshall Plan; so the Marshall Plan played a

considerable role in the initial impetus to integrate," Toggenburg said.

Toggenburg, a senior researcher at the European Academy in Bolzano, Italy, thinks the transfer of ideas will not be an easy one. "I think it is very difficult to apply

By contrast, there is no financial rescue plan available for the Central Asian states. In addition, having only recently emerged from the Soviet Union, those states are more enthusiastic about retaining their sovereignty than Europeans were in the postwar era.

The OSCE's Pupols says his organization realizes the difficulties, and is not trying to persuade Central Asians to adopt EU methods en bloc. He describes the situation

in Central Asia as much more complicated than in Europe. He said the region is basically still "disintegrating," and any new cooperative steps would have to be simple.

cooperate, they have a lot of agreements signed at different levels, but when it comes to practical implementation, the situation is very complicated; and in many cases - because of visas, and customs duties etc., it's getting even worse than it was before."

Describing the region's problems, he said: "Problems are first of all on a political level, and the highest political level; they [the Central Asian states] have a desire to

Pupols said Central Asia does have some positive things going for it. He said even though the five countries are at different levels of economic development, they have more in common with one another than, say, with western China or Pakistan.

In addition, the OSCE official said, they already achieved a certain level of cooperation dating from the Soviet era. For instance, there is a unified energy-transport system and water-supply system. Also, during the Soviet era there was crop specialization, something that has now mostly broken down as each country in the region goes its own way.

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