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Regional Meeting on
Industrial and Business Information Services and Networks

Prague, Czech Republic, 8-10 October 1996

REPORT

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND

1. The undergoing political and economical transformation in the region of central and eastern Europe has, inter alia, seriously affected the coordination and cooperation in the field of development of data banks, information services, information networks and each country has started to design and develop its own information system without knowing what is going on in the neighbouring country, without realizing that some efforts, activities might be duplicated.

This situation has started to present a serious impediment for the transition process of the economy, for the foreign investment and for the development of SMEs for which the availability of the latest business and industrial information data and information services is vital.

UNIDO has realized the danger of absence of coordination activities within the region and convened in October 1994 a meeting of information specialists from sixteen countries in Budapest. The meeting has adopted recommendations which created a base for the UNIDO Regional Programme for Central, Eastern Europe and in the countries of the former Soviet Union, and many technical assistance projects, both ongoing and those under preparation, have been initiated by this meeting.

The participants have appreciated UNIDO's initiative to organize the meeting which, in their view, has proven to be an excellent opportunity for exchanging ideas, experience and discussing and formulating recommendations aiming at improved co-operation within the region. The participants have emphasized the important role of UNIDO in co-ordinating the activities within the region and have urged UNIDO representatives to continue the work in this direction. To this end, a recommendation to organize bi-annually regional meetings of information specialists was adopted. This meeting is in line with the recommendation.

B. Objectives of the Meeting

1. Assess the implementation status of recommendations adopted by the previous meeting held in Budapest and get familiarized with UNIDO's Regional Programme of Industrial and Business Information Services for the biennium 1996-97 with special emphasis on the regional project aiming at establishment of industrial and business information centres in Russia and CIS countries.
2. Get acquainted with the results of the first phase of the regional project Industry and Business Information Services (IBIS) in light of the conclusions adopted by the Bratislava meeting held 14-15 November 1995. Consider in detail UNIDO's proposal for the second phase and formulate recommendations on actions to be taken to facilitate fast and efficient

implementation of the IBIS in the whole region.

3. Exchange views and experience on organization of national information systems/services for industry and on utilization of Internet as a source of business information. Adopt recommendations on the role of the national information centres and UNIDO in improving and upgrading the business information services within the region, and establishing efficient links and exchange of business data with the other regions of the world.

C. ORGANIZATION

The meeting organized by the United Nations Development Organization (UNIDO), in co-operation with the National Information Centre of the Czech Republic (NIC) was held in Prague from 8 to 10 October 1996. Twenty-six participants from 17 countries and two UNIDO representatives took part in the meeting.

Annex II contains the programme of the meeting and Annex III the list of participants.

D. OPENING SESSION

The opening session was held at the National Information Centre of the Czech Republic in Prague. Mr. R. Stefec, Director of the NIC, welcomed the participants and expressed thanks to UNIDO for efforts made in organizing the meeting in Prague. In his statement, he emphasized the importance of the industrial and business information services for SMEs, particularly in the countries of Central- Eastern-Europe and the CIS in view of the undergoing economical transformations.

The representative of the Industrial Information Section of UNIDO welcomed the participants and described the objectives of the meeting.

Election of Officers

The meeting unanimously elected:

Chairman: Mr. R. Stefec, Director, National Information Centre of the Czech Republic, Prague, Czech Republic.

Rapporteur: Mr. J. Klucinski, Chief Programme Officer, Polish Chamber of Commerce, the InfoData Department Information Technology, Warsaw, Poland.

II. WORKING SESSIONS

UNIDO representatives have informed on the objectives of the Industrial Information Section's programme. The principal goal of this programme is to build up national capacities to meet the demand for information and value-added services in a sustainable way and thereby to increase the flow of investment and technology to a country or region. Easy and unrestricted access to all the existing industry support services in a country through networking is vital to ensure the competitiveness of small and medium-sized industries.

The participants were thoroughly informed on the Regional Programme for Central and Eastern Europe and the Newly Independent States (NIS). The projects and activities were assessed against the recommendations and the conclusions of the previous meeting held two years ago in Budapest. Detailed information was provided on the technical assistance projects for Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Federation. Special emphasis was given to the regional project aimed at designing, developing and establishing the Industrial and Business Information System (IBIS).

Directly related to the above assessment were the presentations of country representatives who in detail informed the participants on plans and activities of the business information centers in Russia, on UNIDO's technical assistance projects to ARMINCO (Armenia), TECHINFORMI (Georgia) and to the RISTI (Kyrgyzstan) as well on their follow-up activities and plans for the future. In this context proposals were made to organize training courses on Internet Telematic Applications for the Caucasian countries and for Central Asian countries in 1997. In the presentation of the Russian representatives who reported on the activities of the Moscow located business information center, interesting was the information that from the 120,000 hits/day recorded on their WWW server, 40 % of hits were related to business information. Noteworthy was also the fact that 65% of queries were from the USA. The dramatically increasing demand for the business related information was documented by another Russian delegate who pointed on the fact that while several years ago 80% of the information flow was scientific information, now it represents less than 1%. The Moscow business information center OLVIT closely co-operates with a similar center in the Estonia. Information on the substance of this co-operation with the TRIMARAN company and the business information services in this country was the subject of the presentation made by the Estonian delegate.

One Russian delegate informed on the objectives and results of two training courses on use of the Internet for searching and retrieving the business information. Both UNIDO sponsored courses were highly appreciated by the participants and follow up to these courses was recommended. The delegate has also in a great detail informed on the working plans of the STACCIS (Support for Telematics Applications Cooperation with the Commonwealth of Independent States) project of UNESCO and proposed to coordinate this programme with selected UNIDO programmes, projects.

The representative of the host country has informed the delegates about the history and the present activities of the National Information Center with the emphasis on services of this center focussed on the business community, particularly on the information services for the entrepreneurs in the small and medium-sized industries. In this context the Czech representative elaborated on the overall situation in the country with respect to the business information services which are presently offered by numerous private information brokers.

The Hungarian delegate informed on the situation of business information services in his country. Emphasized the need of the information availability on financial sources, on business partners, on EU regulations for the entrepreneurs in the SMIs.

The representative of the Polish Chamber of Commerce informed that their Business Information System represents a network of 39 regional offices. The main goal of this system is to bring together companies, both Polish and foreign by means of automatic matching. Presentations of representatives from the Slovak Republic and Romania enabled the meeting participants to get acquainted with the role of the Slovak Technical Library in the industrial and business information services and with the efforts of the Joint UNIDO-Romania Center to follow up the recommendations of the previous regional meeting held in 1994 and to improve the industrial and business information services in Romania. The Romanian delegate has also in detail informed on the present situation with regard to the access to the Internet in Romania.

With great interest were received by the meeting participants the presentations of the two guests of the meeting, representatives of two commercial companies, one from Greece and another from Slovakia. EUROCOM EXPERTISE, Greece is committed to provide training services, technologies, consulting in Western and Eastern Europe, Slovak NOVITECH's business is project proposal, design, development, implementation and system integration of information systems for large industrial and commercial corporations and governmental institutions.

Considerable time of the meeting was devoted to the presentation of the UNIDO consultant on the Industrial and Business Information System (IBIS) and to the subsequent discussion of this issue (Annex I).

The significance of the subject has been reflected in a large number of recommendations that have emanated from the extensive discussion. All participating countries have strongly supported the concept of IBIS, stressed the utmost importance to develop the system in the whole region as a system that could significantly contribute to strengthening the SMIs, contributing to the acceleration of the transformation process to market economy, facilitating extensive economic co-operation with other regions of the world, enhancing the technology and investment flow. The participants have come to an unanimous conclusion that IBIS should be developed without any delay and urged UNIDO to pursue vigorously this project with aim to generate the necessary and adequate funding through

intensive promotional activities, which should attract the interest of governments, banks, private companies and other relevant institutions. All participants have made a pledge to start immediately in their countries the necessary activities which would lead to the establishment of the "National Chapters" of the IBIS Home Pages on the Internet's World-Wide-Web and to linking their IBIS networks to those in the participating countries.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The UNIDO meeting offered the participants an opportunity to exchange views and discuss modalities of future co-operation in the entirely new situation characterized by political, economical and social changes in the Central and Eastern European countries and CIS. Particular emphasis was given to the needs of emerging SMEs with respect to industrial and business information services. Although the discussion has indicated some differences and specific problems in countries of the region yet the meeting confirmed that there are common problems which require similar and co-ordinated approach and thus exchange of experience and international co-operation is very desirable and important.

In this context, the participants expressed their opinion that UNIDO is not only fully competent to co-ordinate such co-operation but under the present circumstances, promotion of the co-operation should be considered as one of the top priority objectives of UNIDO.

Information services for small and medium sized enterprises, represent a new category of information services characterized by specific needs. Country reports have shown that each country tries to overcome these difficulties with its own existing or new information systems, the co-ordination of these efforts would be helpful to all countries of the region.

The meeting has shown that the quality of information has become the most critical factor when dealing with contemporary information systems. Provision of credible, trustworthy, accurate and timely information is of paramount importance when designing, implementing and especially when operating national and regional information systems. It has been agreed that every effort should be made to assure the provision of the highest quality information to the national and regional systems, in particular to IBIS.

Participants at the meeting requested the inclusion of the following recommendations:

1. Proceed with the establishment of the IBIS project at the earliest possible date. Any delay could render the work so far achieved out of date.
2. Raise the awareness of business communities in CEE countries in the use of national and international business databases and business information systems via the Internet. This involves also the promotion of the IBIS through a general information campaigns, training courses, seminars, workshops, etc.

3. Emphasis should be placed on the training of end-users and business information officers through the Internet within the framework of the IBIS project.
4. Organize in 1997 two training courses entitled "Internet Telematic Applications" in cooperation with UNESCO project STACCIS:
 - for Caucasian countries in Tbilisi, Georgia;
 - for Central Asian countries, in Issyk Kul, Kyrgyzstan
5. Facilitate the establishment of National Profit Centres (NPC) and District (or Regional) Profit Centres for the IBIS in the countries concerned, which would bring business information closer to companies in the respective districts (regions).
6. Request UNIDO to contact national government authorities in the CEE countries in order to obtain financial resources to facilitate the development of NPCs (RPCs) in these countries.
7. National legal information should be made available on line within the framework of the IBIS project with emphasis on the acts and regulations pertaining to business activities of foreign companies which are ready to establish business relations in the countries participating in the IBIS project.
8. Having in mind the stimulation of international trade in the CEE region, the representatives of the Slovak Republic, Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, proposed an initiative to jointly produce a CD-ROM in English, containing a number of selected national legal frameworks pertaining to the commencement of business activities in their countries.
9. Representatives of Armenia, Estonia and Russia announced their intention to establish a "Common Information Space" (CIS) with the aim to test their national business information systems operating in the area of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Integration of their national systems is planned into an International Business Information System - the CIS-IBIS. Other countries, e.g. the Baltic States, are welcome to join the CIS-IBIS.
10. All participating countries will, as soon as possible, design their IBIS homepages in a standardized form using the pattern proposed during the Prague Meeting. Discussion Groups would be organized to this end with the use of the Internet in order to work together in a collaborative manner. The IBIS and UNIDO logos should be included into national homepages. In each of national homepage links should be assured to other IBIS national homepages.
11. The preparation of national case studies is advisable in order to exhibit evidence of the

successful use of the Internet

12. A search engine for the IBIS should be designed and implemented. This should be a software package aimed at indexing and searching documents . This should include a design for an information retrieval language.
13. Issues of electronic commerce should be taken into consideration for the purpose of the IBIS project. Appropriate telematic mechanisms should be introduced to this end into future IBIS software.
14. Efforts should be enhanced by the countries concerned towards the integration of their domestic ISIS databases into the Internet web by means of designing a customized interface in order to make these databases available through the WWW.
15. UNIDO would be requested to establish a "list server" as a specially dedicated hardware for the purpose of IBIS in order to increase the efficiency of data transmission process the PROXY server should be applied.

IV. ADOPTION OF RECOMMENDATIONS

After detailed discussions the meeting adopted the recommendations. The participants expressed their readiness to assure the implementation of the recommendations related to their countries and at the same time urged UNIDO to make all the efforts for implementing those addressing the needs of the whole region and co-ordination of the national activities.

V. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The meeting expressed deep appreciation for the efforts made by UNIDO, for the organization of the meeting and offered special thanks to the NIC for providing excellent host facilities.

INDUSTRIAL AND BUSINESS INFORMATION SYSTEM (IBIS)

The IBIS is a UNIDO project implemented as part of the INTIB (Information Networking for Technology, Industry and Business) programme. The first proposal of the Industry and Business Information System (IBIS) was made during the workshop of leading information specialists and directors of the information centers from sixteen countries of Central and Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union, organized by UNIDO (17-19 October, 1994) in Budapest. As a result, a preparatory assistance project entitled Regional Industrial and Business Information Services, XP/RER/95/061 has been launched in the mid of 1995. As part of this project a concept of IBIS was worked out and thoroughly discussed by the representatives of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic during the UNIDO workshop that took place in Bratislava throughout 13-15 November, 1995.

IBIS will provide primary, secondary and referral information on industrial, business and related matters, as well as, provide access to various information resources, services and institutions and will cover the all countries of the Central and Eastern Europe and the NIS. IBIS is aimed at designing, developing and establishing an information system/network that would enable the users, at any location of the region, to access and obtain information required to run their businesses in the region or worldwide. To achieve this goal it is, however, not intended to create new centers, networks and vast databases, the existing information centers and national/global networks could be utilized. In fact, IBIS will be a regional pool of participating countries which will contribute to the system through making available some of their resources to others. UNIDO will coordinate this work.

IBIS will offer (i) training and information about training on the various types of value-added industrial and business information services; (ii) will present business opportunities to the entrepreneurs; (iii) will provide referral information on the various aspects of industry and business, and last but not least (iv) will be a forum for business concerned agents, and industry and business information communities, and thereby, will become a platform for integration of the business community.

- An organizational pattern of IBIS is founded on two pillars, namely
- the Focal Point at UNIDO (FP/UNIDO);
- a set of National Profit Centers (NPCs).

The main access to all IBIS actors (NPC, FP/UNIDO, IBIS users) and data channels between them will be based on the Internet facilities.

Strategic objectives of the project are:

- to initiate and facilitate cooperation and coordination between the countries in designing and developing compatible and harmonized industrial and business information facilities (networks, databases, information services, etc.);
- to make industrial and business information and services available directly to the end-users, in particular to SMEs, throughout the region;
- to set up a channel for transferring cutting-edge technologies and management techniques related to industrial and business information activities to the region and within the region.

Operational objectives of the project are:

- to design and to start up the FP/UNIDO and NPCs and make them operational;
- NPCs to gain and serve as many end-users as possible, focusing on SMEs.

Two phases of the IBIS system building strategy are distinguished:

Phase 1:

This phase is devoted to preparing a ground for the IBIS creation. To this end, a full-fledged IBIS Focal Point (FP/UNIDO) at the Industrial Information Section of UNIDO; will be set up. The FP/UNIDO will be an incubator of NPCs and a coordinating body of the whole IBIS network on a day-to-day basis during the project execution. The outputs of this phase to be used in the next phase will be:

(I) a computer hardware and basic software vendor to provide all the NPCs with unified equipment and software will be identified and contracted;

(ii) the IBIS FP/UNIDO server connected to the Internet;

(iii) methods and tools for establishing the NPCs; (iv) the work patterns and modalities such that the self-sustainability of the IBIS operation after the project completion be achievable.

Phase 2:

This phase is focused on the establishment of the full-featured IBIS National Profit Centers (NPCs) in the all countries interested to participate in the system. NPCs will be forced to compete with others on the market and to generate profit, therefore, it has to exhibit strong

commitment to marketing. The functionality provided by the IBIS during the first two phases is intended to establish the network as a operational entity and demonstrate its potential and usefulness to a growing user community. The architecture of IBIS is such that the above should be readily achieved, while fully safeguarding investments already made in IBIS.

(The IBIS has been dealt with in detail in the previous UNIDO documents [IRD3(SPEC), IRD/R.5, IRD/R.6, IRD/R.7, IRD/R.8, IRD/R.9, IRD/R.10,])

MEETING PROGRAMME**Prague, 8-10 October 1996****Tuesday, 8 October 1996****Morning**

8:30 - 10:00	Registration
10:00 - 10:05	Opening of the Meeting and election of officers
10:05 - 10:30	Role of the UNIDO Industrial Information Section in light of the new information needs of industry in developing countries and newly independent states (Mr. V. Podshibyakin)
10:30 - 10:50	Regional information services for east and central Europe (Mr. J. Pavlik)
10:50 - 11:10	Coffee break
11:10 - 12:00	Business information centres in Russia, report on phase I, outline of the second phase (Messrs. Y. Savostitsky, V. Bodianski, S. Svirida)

Afternoon:

14:30 - 15:30	NIC its role and services with particular emphasis on business information services for entrepreneurs (Mr. R. Stefec)
15:30 - 15:50	Coffee break
15:50 - 17:00	Industrial and business information services in the region. Experience in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Romania (Messrs. G. Stubnya, J. Klucinski, O. Cvik, L. Kucka, O. Negru)

Wednesday, 9 October 1996**Morning:**

9:00 - 9:30	Internet training courses - experience and lessons learned (Mr. A. Gvishiani)
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9:30 - 12:00 Industry and Business Information System - report on achievements and plans for the future (Mr. M. Muraszkieicz)

Afternoon:

14:30 - 15:00 Internet based company information system - NOVITECH (Mr. A. Toth)
Activities and training programmes of EUROCOM EXPERTISE (Ms. D. Kitsiou)

15:00-16:00 Industrial and business information services in the region. Experience in Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan (Messrs. G. Saghian, K. Baranov, T. Chubinishvili, K. Sydykov)

16:00 - 16:15 Coffee break

16.15 - 17:00 Industrial and business information services in the region. Experience in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Ukraine (Messrs. T. Babaev, O. Seklitsky, M. Yermoshenko)

Thursday, 10 October 1996

Morning:

9:00 - 11:00 Industrial and Business Information System. (Discussion)

11:00 - 11:30 Coffee break

11:30 - 13:00 Formulation and adoption of recommendations

13:00 Closing of the Meeting

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