

**Item 4. Report by Olga Zhankevich, EPSU/PSI sub-regional secretary.
Activities and recent developments in Russia and Central Asia**

Data analysis shows that, in 2016, the socioeconomic indicators of the economy's development continued to deteriorate in the majority of states.

In 2016 in general, the principal macroeconomic indicators of the region's countries fell. GDP measured in volume terms was 97.1%. In the region as a whole, industrial manufacturing during the given period fell by 3.3%; freight shipping (pipelines excluded) fell by 2.4% (a decrease of 0.3%). In addition, retail turnover fell by 8.7%. The volume of investments in fixed assets went down by 6.7%.

2016 principal socioeconomic indicators (%)

| | GDP (in fixed prices) | Industrial products (in fixed prices) | Investments in fixed assets (in fixed prices) | Freight shipping (pipelines) | Retail turnover (in fixed prices; all types of retail sales) | Consumer price indices |
|------------|---------------------------------|---|---|--|--|-------------------------------|
| Kazakhstan | 101.2 | 98.4 | 103.7 | 99.7 | 99.6 | 113.6 |
| Kyrgyzstan | 103.5 | 95.6 | 108.0 | 102.7 | 106.0 | 103.4 |
| Russia | 96.3 | 96.6 | 91.6 | 97.1 | 90.0 | 112.9 |
| Tajikistan | 106.0 | 111.2 | 121.2 | 103.8 | 105.5 | 105.0 |

In most countries of the region, per capita GDP fell in 2016. This is the crucial macroeconomic indicator demonstrating a state's wealth and reflecting the real prosperity level of every individual citizen.

The slowdown in the region's countries is linked primarily to falling domestic demand. Russia showed the biggest drop in this indicator. The downturn in domestic demand is due to the continuing fall in the population's real incomes and weak investment activity. In 2016, most countries' currencies fell on the exchange markets in relation to the US dollar and the euro.

The sharp drop in the total value of foreign trade in the countries of the sub-region also evidences exacerbation of the crisis; in 2015, the total value fell by almost a third (32.5%). Exports fell by 32.3%; imports fell by 32.9%, which resulted in the trade surplus falling by 31.1%. The overall volume of foreign trade turnover went down in all the countries.

The sharp reduction in mutual commodities trade between the CIS countries is of particular concern: the total value of mutual trade fell by 32.6% (year on year). Exports fell by 32.8% and imports by 32.3%.

Foreign trade in the Eurasian Economic Union, positioned as an "advanced" integration project, is in a similar situation. The total value of mutual trade fell by 28.1%. Russia demonstrated the sharpest drop, by 29.5% (primarily owing to falling raw material prices). The Union's trade with other countries fell even more (by 35%), which evidences the benefits integration and regional free trade zones afford to economic development.

Yet the drops in trade indicators are significant and are grounds for some concerns, given the circumstances on the region's external borders, the western countries' toughening policies and imposition of sanctions on Russia, the CIS' biggest economy.

The economic situation also influenced the labour markets. The number of part-time jobs is on the rise in many countries, while that of available jobs is falling; the informal sector is expanding (estimated to account for approximately a fifth of the countries' employed population). In 2016, unemployment remained virtually unchanged over 2015. Calculated using the ILO methodology, it was 6.3% of the economically active population and increased by only 0.2 percentage points compared to 2015. The same applies to youth unemployment.

Unemployment in 2013-2016 (% of the economically active population)

| | Calculated using the ILO methodology | | | | Registered unemployment | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------|------|------|---------|-------------------------|------|------|---------|
| | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 01.2016 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 01.2016 |
| Kazakhstan | 5.2 | 5.1 | 5.0 | | 0.3 | 0.4 | 0.4 | 0.7 |
| Kyrgyzstan | 8.4 | 8.2 | ... | - | 2.3 | 2.3 | 2.2 | 2.3 |
| Russia | 5.5 | 5.2 | 5.7 | - | 1.2 | 1.2 | 1.3 | 1.3 |
| Tajikistan | ... | ... | ... | - | 2.5 | 2.4 | 2.5 | 2.2 |

In mid-2016, unemployment benefits were paid: in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to 1% of the registered unemployed, in Russia to 85%. In Tajikistan, the average unemployment benefits were 306.9 somoni. In Russia, the minimum unemployment benefits were set at RUB 850 (USD 12), maximum benefits at RUB 4,900 (USD 70). In several states, benefits have not been adjusted for many years despite the growing costs of living.

Migration processes also contribute to the situation on the labour markets. Immediate reporting data show that, in 2016, Russia had a migration gain (a greater number of immigrants arriving in Russia for permanent residence compared to the number of emigrants).

It is difficult to predict further developments on the labour market yet the largely pessimistic economic forecast indicate that a further gradual deterioration of the situation should be expected.

At the same time, in most countries of the region, the labour market has adapted to the difficult economic circumstances through pay cuts, rather than a spike in unemployment, which is typical for many developed countries. Employees prefer to take pay cuts or work fewer hours; they are more willing to take lower-paying jobs with high-paying jobs being cut, which reflects negatively on the wage level.

Calculated in dollars, the 2016 average monthly wage in Tajikistan was USD 142, in Kyrgyzstan USD 206, in Russia USD 560, and in Kazakhstan USD 565. It is still low, insufficient for a fulfilling life, and it is mostly spent on food. In several countries, the majority of the population spends over half their wages on food (56% of the population in Kazakhstan, 61% in Russia). It should be noted that, alongside with low wages, the amounts of wages owed keep increasing.

Apart from the above-noted circumstances, low wages are largely due to the fact that, in most of the region's states, the principal state guarantee, the minimum wage (minimum legal wage), is set below the living wage.

In 2015, nominal wages, as well as pensions and other types of the people's income, did grow somewhat. Yet virtually all the region's states demonstrate a slowdown in real wages growth. Both in Kazakhstan and Russia, real wages themselves have dropped, and real pensions have

dropped in Russia and in Tajikistan. In several countries, the drop was incommensurate with the crucial macroeconomic indicators.

The pace of growth (+), decrease (-) of several socioeconomic indicators in the CIS countries

| | GDP | Industrial production | Real | |
|------------|------|-----------------------|-------|----------|
| | | | wages | pensions |
| Kazakhstan | 1.2 | -1.6 | -2.8 | 2.7 |
| Kyrgyzstan | 3.5 | -4.4 | 2.5 | -6.1 |
| Russia | -3.7 | -3.4 | -9.3 | -2.9 |
| Tajikistan | 6.0 | 11.2 | 1.4 | -5.4 |

In Kazakhstan, with its relatively stable economy, real pensions and real wages dropped. In Tajikistan, with its significant GDP and industrial production growth, real pensions fell by over 5%. In Russia, with a GDP drop of 3.7%, real wages fell by 9.3%.

The citizens' devalued income was due to the considerable rise in consumer prices due to powerful inflationary pressure from devaluing national currencies and ineffective economic policies.

Consumer prices went up fastest in Kazakhstan and in Russia. A tangible blow to family budgets was dealt by the rising food prices; the price increase varied from 3 to 46% in the sub-region's countries, while in the EU, food became only 0.3% more expensive. This is largely due to the fact that, in the European countries, prices are greatly influenced by state policy; loans for entrepreneurs are cheaper; farmer food production and processing is better developed; competition is high, and this keeps prices from being unjustifiably high. In the CIS countries, several issues that influence pricing remain unresolved. Besides, prices increase significantly owing to multiple merchant middlemen.

As a result, consumption by the population dropped, as is indirectly evidenced by one of the strategic segments of the national economies: retail, which finished the year with negative results. In its report on the socioeconomic situation in Russia, the Ministry of Energy of the Russian Federation, for example, records the highest drop in public consumption in the last 40 years. Yet the Ministry explains this not through a record decline in the standard of living but through "adjustments in the household consumption model: from consumption to saving."

Growth pace for several indicators in the sub-region's countries

| | Real wage | Retail turnover | Deposits by individuals, total | Including | |
|------------|-----------|-----------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| | | | | Deposits in national currency | Deposits in foreign currencies calculated in the national currency |
| Kazakhstan | 97.2 | 92.3 | 154.7 | 99.5 | 181.5 |
| Kyrgyzstan | 102.5 | 111.7 | 136.1 | 113.3 | 151.7 |
| Russia | 90.7 | 84.7 | 125.2 | 119.6 | 140.8 |
| Tajikistan | 101.4 | 100.8 | 127.5 | 126.3 | 127.8 |

The table shows that, in some states, the sharp drop in retail turnover is accompanied by falling real wages and people's deposits in national currencies. This means that the population is beginning to "eat up" its savings. The growth of deposits in foreign currencies calculated in national currencies is largely explained by the devaluation of national currencies. On the whole, the increase in bank deposits should be viewed as a defence mechanism against inflation and devaluation risks, and not as a change in the population's behavioural model. Today, it is utopian to think that the population's deposits create an opportunity for an investment

breakthrough. In Russia, for instance, only 35% of households have savings and, in January 2016, an outflow of deposits started in Russia.

Today, ever-greater numbers of consumers are moving from being active participants in commerce to being observers. Consequently, whereas, during the previous crisis, businesses had impressive consumer market support, today, the population's falling purchasing power precludes businesses from counting on this resource.

Some middle-class people are becoming poor. It should be emphasised particularly that the shrinking of the middle class does not stem from a redistribution of public wealth but from most people's shrinking incomes. In particular, research conducted by the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration showed that the share of middle-class Russians had shrunk by the end of 2015 from 20% to 15% of the population. The latest data put this indicator at 20–30% in Kazakhstan and at 2–3% in Tajikistan.

The significant social differentiation in the region's countries is largely due to government policies. Most states do not use the instruments at their disposal to regulate wage differentiation, such as legal determination of a sufficient living wage and minimum wage, limiting payments to top managers; they are against improving taxation of citizens' income to have it based on social justice and they refuse to introduce a progressive taxation scale.

Differentiation, falling real wages, pensions, and other incomes of the population are occurring against a background of increasing commercialisation of social services, introduction of new payments and taxes or increase in mandatory ones, attempts to toughen labour laws, and cutting of workers' rights and guarantees.

The healthcare reforms carried out in the region's countries are intended to decentralise state healthcare systems, to introduce mandatory medical insurance, achieve a restructuring of the sector, develop the private healthcare sector and optimise resource provision. These reforms are being carried out against a background of severe shortages of funds in the healthcare system for supplying medical organisations with all the state-of-the-art equipment and consumables they require; for complying with today's treatment standards; for meeting the populations' real need for quality medical care; for optimal human resourcing in healthcare; for paying a decent wage and enhancing social security for medical personnel. Given the difficult economic situation, many states did not adjust the 2016 budgetary allocations for healthcare and education, and this will undoubtedly have a negative impact on public access to healthcare and other social services.

The above analysis bears out that most of the region's countries are moving further and further away from social state principles: the population's standard of living and their social security have fallen markedly. Contradictions between Labour and Capital are intensifying. Big businesses are continuing to encroach on workers' legal rights and, in many countries, the government's economic, budgetary and financial policies are increasingly orientated toward ultra-liberal values that entail less government regulation, curtailment of wage and pension rises and abolition of all social guarantees. On the whole, the problems of the difficult economic situation are being progressively shifted on to the working population.

Owing to the socioeconomic situation in the region's countries, the trade union movement is facing the question of increasing its role in resolving crisis-related social problems, in improving forms of participation in searching for ways out of the predicament, in defending the rights and interests of hired workers.

When developing their stance and proposals on the action to be undertaken by the region's trade union federations, trade unions proceeded from adherence to social partnership. They viewed lacking social dialogue or, worse, conflict, as a counterproductive measure equivalent to missed competitive edge. Trade unions used strikes, picketing and rallies as a measure of last resort.

The trade unions thus both declared their willingness to participate in the discussion and implementation of anti-crisis programmes and followed through on their willingness by regularly submitting their ideas to the authorities and administrative bodies. Trade unions insisted on and succeeded in gaining access to discussions and decision-making, to drafting national economic development (anti-crisis) programmes, all the while defending the rights and interests of employees. Many issues were reflected in the current general and sectoral agreements and collective bargaining agreements.

Key issues to which trade unions regularly drew attention included developing the economy, creating decent jobs, employment, work environment, wages, the people's total incomes and quality of life. Trade unions constantly monitored the socioeconomic situation in the region's countries and formed a united stance on trade union actions.

The Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Kazakhstan (FTUK) supported the National Plan approved by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan: 100 concrete steps to implement five institutional reforms. One of the reforms is intended to promote industrialisation and economic growth.

Defending workers' interests, Kazakhstan's trade unions participated actively in drafting the new Labour Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Meetings of the Working Commission were held daily and 117 proposals were made for improving the draft. Constructive work on drafting the new Labour Code was conducted jointly with the Ministry of Healthcare and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan, making it possible to take into account most of the problematic issues in labour relations.

An educational system has been put in place to explain the articles of the new Labour Code: the FTUK launched a Centre for Education, Research and Conflict Resolution; 7 regional education centres are also operational. As of 1 April 2016, the FTUK had trained 32,550 people, including 19,000 heads of local trade unions.

Starting in 2016, Kazakhstan has been establishing Public Councils to express opinions on socially relevant issues; the Councils include representatives of territorial unions. Currently, the process of establishing Public Councils in sectoral ministries is nearing completion; trade unions have participated in the process. Sectoral and territorial unions will use this institution to protect the rights and interests of the Person of Labour.

In the General Agreement for the years 2015–2017, social partners undertake obligations intended to achieve productive employment, expand a decent work environment and create favourable conditions for developing human potential. The key new feature of the General Agreement is that it is legally binding. This also applies to sectoral and regional agreements and collective bargaining agreements.

Signing of trilateral memoranda has become an important element in the social dialogue. Since February 2015, work has been under way throughout Kazakhstan to conclude memoranda on mutual cooperation between regional akims, employers and trade unions on stabilising manufacturing processes, ensuring labour rights and guarantees for employees, and on social security and employment for laid-off personnel. The memoranda stipulate that, should production fall, employers undertake to introduce a temporary part-time working day or assign personnel to other types of work on modernising and renovating facilities that are temporarily out of service; they also stipulate Khakimyats' obligations to coordinate the parties' joint work. As of 11 March 2016, regional Khakimyats, employers and trade unions had concluded 105,000 memoranda covering over 2.5 million workers.

The "Employment Roadmap-2020" state programme is the principal instrument in ensuring public employment. Trade unions participated in developing it. The programme is intended to

expand measures that ensure public employment and to prevent lay-offs. In the current year, approximately 38,000 jobs will be created under the programme.

Kazakhstan's trade unions took an active part in drafting the law "On Public Employment"; the draft involves transitioning to international approaches to measuring labour market indicators; altering approaches to and differentiating social support measures for the unemployed; altering the procedure for granting "unemployed" status as a the person's level of responsibility increases; modernising the work of employment centres according to the "one-stop-shop" service model, etc.

The passing of this law will make labour market regulation more effective; expand assistance to the population in finding employment; improve the services rendered to the population; enhance target-orientation in providing social support for the unemployed; ensure that Kazakhstan's labour market indicators are comparable to those of other countries.

Jointly with the state labour inspectorate, Kazakhstan's trade unions are taking steps to eradicate wage arrears, which are monitored on a regular basis. Information on wage arrears is compiled by anti-crisis regional headquarters from data provided by local branches of the Public Prosecutor's Office, by local labour inspectorates, agencies for coordination employment and social projects in the regions, in the cities of Astana and Almaty, etc.

The 23rd congress of **Kyrgyzstan Federation of Trade Unions** applied to the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic concerning the need to revise the socioeconomic policy, in particular in such areas as wages, pricing and specific steps intended to achieve real improvement of the population's quality of life.

It was suggested that appropriate laws be passed improving wage regulation in Kyrgyzstan and increasing the proportion of wages in GDP to 50–60%; aligning the legally guaranteed minimum wage with the living wage for an able-bodied person; achieving agreement on the minimum wage with social partners at the Republican Trilateral Commission.

Kyrgyzstan's trade unions demanded that state pricing regulation be introduced and that unjustified price rises on socially significant and essential foods be stopped.

The KFTU focused particularly on the economy's informal sector, where employees lack social security. A multitude of problems stem from this: falling living standards, rising prices and unemployment, which forces people to agree to work without employment contracts. These problems, as well as other issues, were discussed in March 2016 at the National Roundtable on the informal economy; social partners that attended the roundtable included state agencies, employers and trade unions. Specific measures for legalising shadow employment were delineated, particularly with respect to small and medium-sized businesses.

The Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR) outlined its version of Russia's potential development. The version entails creating a new economic growth model that would ensure development and an improved competitive edge of the economy's real sector; availability of loans for enterprises; creating new manufacturing enterprises and decent jobs in all economic sectors; active stimulation of domestic demand as a development factor for the national manufacturing industry. Owing to the trade unions' persistent demands, target indicators for creating and modernising highly-productive jobs are included in state programmes and sectoral development strategies, as well as action plans of federal executive bodies.

When discussing the draft action plan of the Government of the Russian Federation intended to ensure Russia's stable socioeconomic development in 2016, the FNPR suggested that it include measures for increasing the population's purchasing power. In particular, it was suggested that the minimum wage be increased to a living wage by 2017; that top managers' wages be capped for organisations with over 50% state-owned stocks (shares); that non-

contributory pensions and state social security pensions to unemployed retirees be additionally adjusted for the difference between real inflation in 2015 and the pension adjustment of 1 February 2016; that a non-taxable income level for individuals be introduced in the amount of the living wage. Several other measures were also proposed.

The trade unions deem it unacceptable to optimise budgetary expenses and mitigate budgetary risks by curbing wage growth and cutting social guarantees as is currently proposed by the Government. When discussing the principal trends of the budgetary policy and the draft federal budget, the FNPR noted that the budgetary policy should have as its strategic priority orientating the budgetary system toward stable economic growth, investing in the infrastructure, high-tech sectors, sciences and the social sphere, increasing people's quality of life, and using these as a basis for expanding the budget's revenue base. Both efficiency in managing budgetary expenses and the quality of state fiscal management must be improved.

While working on concluding sectoral and regional agreements, trade unions do their best to make sure that these agreements include obligations to ensure higher minimum wage for employees than the minimum state guarantees. The FNPR suggests that base set wages and base wage rates be set no lower than the minimum wage. To elaborate further the proposals on set wages for qualification groups for professionals employed in the public sector and the proposals on monitoring wage regulation for public sector employees, constituent entities of the Russian Federation created an inter-agency group, including representatives of sectoral trade unions, under the Ministry of Labour of the Russian Federation. The FNPR initiated amending Article 142 of the Labour Code of the Russian Federation; pursuant to these amendments, starting in 2016, in the event of wage arrears during temporary suspension of operations, employers are required by law to pay employees the average wage. For a long time, this tenet was only the result of interpretation of the labour legislation by courts, primarily by the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation.

Trade unions posit the issues of increasing minimum unemployment benefits to align with a living wage for an able-bodied person (currently, the maximum unemployment allowance is RUB 4,900, while in the Russian Federation as a whole, the living wage for an able-bodied population is twice that); of increasing financing for additional re-training programmes and temporary jobs to prevent mass lay-offs. The FNPR is continuing to negotiate with social partners on introducing insurance principles covering loss of job.

The FNPR's representatives are permanent participants in the inter-agency working group on monitoring the labour market in Russia's constituent entities; in the inter-agency working group that considers and selects such programmes in Russia's constituent entities, providing for additional steps in the area of public employment, which are intended to relieve labour market tension in Russia's constituent entities; and also in the working group under the Government Commission on Economic Development and Integration focused on modernising mono-industry cities. In 2015, trade unions resumed monitoring labour markets. As part of this process, trade unions provide monthly data on crisis-hit enterprises (lay-offs, non-payment of wages, introduction of a part-time working week, enterprise shutdown). The labour market situation, including results of the trade union monitoring, are considered each month at meetings of the Russian Trilateral Commission on Regulating Social and Labour Relations.

As for employment, the FNPR insists on the need to develop a series of measures that would ensure employment for young people first entering the job market; on effectiveness of interregional labour mobility and on ensuring the principle of Russian citizens being given priority in employment; on carrying out effective control over hiring of foreign citizens; on reducing informal employment.

The FNPR insists that a system should be formed to forecasting long-term supply and demand on the labour market in the regional and qualification aspects. Trade Unions of Russia are continuing their efforts to connect all the elements of the National Qualification System, the key

link that should tie together requirements set on the work environment, employees, professional education and wages.

The FNPR has developed and submitted to Russia's leadership specific proposals for improving the socioeconomic situation and on reducing the negative impact the crisis is having on working people. The Federation has expressed its concern over Russians' falling purchasing power; over attempts to return to having insurance deductions collected by non-budget social funds managed by the Revenue Service. The Federation suggests that a moratorium should be introduced in 2016 on all such decisions and initiatives of the executive bodies that entail an increase in direct and indirect levies on the population. The Federation also posed the issue of the need to preserve the current mechanism for adjusting pensions, subsidies, and social payments for real inflation and insisted on ensuring unconditional compliance with RF Presidential Orders on increasing wages for individual categories of public sector employee.

In order to protect employees' rights to timely payment of wages, the FNPR participated in amending the Russian legislation regulating the procedure for paying compensation to employees if wages are due them but not paid by an employer against which insolvency (bankruptcy) proceedings have been initiated.

Yet violations of workers' rights and guarantees have not always been resolved through social partnership; conflicts did arise. As of the end of January 2016, 15 social and labour conflicts were recorded in Russia. Of these, over two thirds (67%) were linked to wage levels and non-payment of wages (57%) and lay-offs (10%). Nearly half of the conflicts (45%) occurred in the construction industry, automotive industry, and in healthcare. Compared to 2014, in 2015, the number of conflicts that resulted in complete or partial satisfaction of the workers' demands dropped.

In March of that year, the issue of "The actions of trade unions today" was discussed at a meeting of the Federation's General Council. The current state of affairs in the economy and in the social and labour spheres was assessed: owing to the Russian Government's insufficiently thought-out economic and fiscal policies, Russian enterprises were cut off from available loans and Russian citizens were faced with rising prices first on imported, then on Russian-made goods. The meeting adopted a detailed decision on the trade unions' tasks and their actions.

Members of the General Council believe that trade unions should focus on the situation in local trade unions. Any attempt to freeze or not to adjust wages, or to revise the collective bargaining agreement should constitute grounds for a serious investigation. The members emphasised that, within sectoral trade unions, the FNPR as a whole should carry out a series of actions in support of local trade unions, to develop sectoral and federal support programmes for trade union organisations. They also noted the need to support the trade unions' information activities.

The **Republic of Tajikistan** carries out specific work to implement the State Programme on Decent Labour. In 2015, under state and sectoral programmes developed with active participation by the trade unions, 205,000 new jobs were created. The State Programme for Advancing Public Employment in 2016–2017 was adopted in order to provide jobs for the unemployed and labour migrants returning to their homeland; under the programme, over 300,000 jobs are to be created and re-instated. Trade unions participated in drafting the Personal Social Aid Programme for the years 2016–2020. Over 50% of the 2015 state budget has been allocated for the social sphere.

The efforts of the Tajikistan Federation of Independent Trade Unions bore tangible fruit in reducing poverty. Nominal and real wages are increasing. Trade union pressure has resulted in an impending increase in minimum wages by 60% in the current year, from 250 to 400 somoni, and in citizens' retirement pensions by 20%. Wages of public sector employees will go up by 15–25%.

The Executive General Council of Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Tajikistan held a hearing on the results of audits on timely payment of wages in Tajikistan's organisations and enterprises. Inspections of enterprises in various sectors are conducted jointly with the state technical labour inspectorate.

Trade unions constantly monitor the situation with wage arrears. Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Tajikistan has succeeded in establishing state-level headquarters for eliminating wage arrears; the HQ members include representatives of state authorities, law enforcement agencies and trade unions. The HQ's work has brought tangible results: in 2015, wage arrears dropped by nearly a half.

Analysis of the socioeconomic situation shows that negative trends are continuing to develop in many of the region's states and social tensions are on the rise. The current economic model, often based on neoliberal principles, has become a real challenge for trade unions and societies as a whole. States with constitutions defining them as social states are, in fact, move further and further away from carrying out social guarantees and their obligations to their citizens. There are even suggestions that the notion of a "social state" should be reconsidered.

The economic and power elites of the independent states are exhibiting an ever-greater tendency to overcome the shock of the economic crisis at the expense of their peoples; the brunt of the hardships is shunted on to the working population. In some independent states, these processes are taking place against the background of the government paying less attention to trade union opinions, either directly or indirectly; consequently, this background has become one of a weakening and unstable position of the trade unions themselves and, in the opinion of some local trade unions, the trade unions themselves are not always prepared to fight against the encroaching infringement upon the rights and interests of the working people, to defend their previous achievements.

At the same time, the media frequently create an information blackout for trade unions; their stance and actions are hushed up and this diminishes public support for trade unions and does not allow them to enhance their image.

Current socioeconomic development problems are a serious challenge for trade unions in the region's independent states, which brings to the fore the need for trade unions to take appropriate steps. We believe that the current situation requires trade union to transition to more aggressive action in the struggle for workers' legal rights. To achieve their goals, trade unions should strengthen their membership, their organisational structure and financial situation.

Constituency meeting

The meeting took place 16-17 March 2016 in Moscow. EPSU affiliates from Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan took part.

The unions considered a range of other policies. They discussed:

- The current situation in Europe. The perspective on these developments depends very much from which country you look at it. It is important for the unions to strengthen our voice and work together.

- The economic situation. The slowdown of growth in China, US, EU also effects Russia and the Central Asian republics, although in different ways. Sanctions are hurting workers and people. The unions argued they should be ended. And governments should invest in public infrastructure. Due to the economic problems fewer people migrate to Russia from Central-Asia. It also means that the amount of remittances send back is lower this hurting demand and growth in yet another way.

- Several countries have seen negative wage growth. Like many other unions the unions campaign for increases in minimum wages. Actions are undertaken for decent pay raises. Wages in public services are lagging behind average wages in all countries.

Labour codes are under attack in most of the Central Asian countries and protests have taken place in Kyrgyzstan.

- EPSU priorities for 2016 and forthcoming actions and events. EPSU's work on trade and taxation was commented upon. The Russian unions see few benefits from the membership of the WTO and are concerned about the impact of TISA. The new generation of trade agreements focused on regulation implies a loss of sovereignty.
- The next PSI Congress in October 2017 in Geneva. The focus on the region remains important. Migration is an important issue as Russia has 9-10 million migrants including an estimated million from Ukraine. Redistribution of wealth should be an important issue. The unions welcomed the inclusion of PSI in the new high level panel on health workforce of the UN.

The documents of the Russia-Central Asian constituency meeting, 16-17 March 2016, Moscow, Russia are available <http://www.epsu.org/article/epsu-russia-and-central-asia-constituency-meeting-2016>

Youth seminar on organizing

The seminar took place in December 2016 in Ekaterinburg. Nearly 30 representatives from 18 regional organizations from across the country took part. The included representatives from the union's youth committee and representatives of the Central Asian unions. EPSU and the Federation of Trade unions of the Sverdlovsk region supported the seminar.

How to build union power was the overall topic of a course on organizing and modernization of unions of the Russian Health Workers Trade Union. The young trade unionists talked about the elements of successful organizing campaigns based on the experience of the young workers themselves. When addressing work places issues, crucial elements are planning and clear goals and tasks so progress can be measured and evaluated; preparation by researching the sector and in this specific case the market for health and other care services, studying the enterprises active, the problems faced by workers and work to give voice and visibility to these problems; build reliable relations that lead to stable results; evaluate the results and plan for the negotiations to seek solutions. Many side issues were explored including the use of social media. <http://www.epsu.org/article/strategies-organizing-workers-trade-unions-discussed-young-russian-unionists>

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