



Arriving at the summit (left to right): ITU Secretary-General Hamadoun I. Touré; President of Kyrgyzstan Kurmanbek Bakiyev; President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev; President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko; President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon, and President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan

Connect CIS Summit

Leaders debate the digital future

■ As part of its *Connect the World* series, ITU organized a *Connect CIS Summit* in Minsk, Belarus, on 26–27 November 2009. It brought together some 350 participants from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and neighbouring countries, including five Heads of State from Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, as well as representatives of government, industry and financial and development institutions. The summit was hosted by President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko, and was preceded by a ministerial meeting on 25 November.

In his message to the summit, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that “unequal access to information and communication technologies (ICT) impedes productivity and innovation”. This directly affects efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, he added, and so “we want to enhance digital opportunities for all, and find new

ways for these remarkable technologies to advance economic and social development.”

Noting that “it is now time to turn words into action,” ITU Secretary-General Hamadoun I. Touré said that “this can only happen through a renewed commitment to partnership — in particular partnerships between the public and private sectors. It can only

The summit was organized in partnership with, among others, the Regional Commonwealth in the Field of Communications; the Commonwealth of Independent States Executive Committee; the World Bank; the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; the European Investment Bank; the Islamic Development Bank; the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, and the United Nations Global Alliance for ICT and Development.



Igor Shegolev, Minister of Telecom and Mass Communications, Russian Federation, said that large-scale projects are needed to foster access to ICT. Also, appropriate regulatory frameworks are essential for promoting broadband

over high-speed broadband infrastructure, such as e-health, online education and e-commerce. In addition, it examined the issues involved in moving government services online.

Another panel considered some of the essential ingredients for building a knowledge-based society, and examined how CIS countries can best build upon their strength in highly skilled personnel. It also examined how broadband connectivity for schools not only promotes ICT literacy and provides a platform for lifelong training, but also means that schools can be used as ICT centres for their surrounding communities. ITU's *Connect a School, Connect a Community* initiative was particularly noted in this context, as well as the ITU Academy that promotes specialist training.

The risks and challenges associated with the emerging information society were further topics of debate, in particular the need to protect data and privacy online, through such initiatives as the ITU-IMPACT Collaboration on Cybersecurity. Also, a session was held on the issues and the timetable for CIS countries in moving from analogue to digital broadcasting. And participants considered ways to use the "digital dividend" of radio-frequency spectrum that will be released when analogue broadcasting is discontinued.

Commitment to the future

A number of partners announced commitments to various initiatives during the *Connect CIS Summit*.

These included implementing the Transnational Eurasian Information Super Highway project, as described by Azerbaijan's Minister of Communications and Information Technologies Ali Abbasov. The Super Highway is expected to help supply 20 countries of the region with high-speed Internet access and telecommunication systems.

A joint venture in Belarus will develop national mobile payment systems based on wireless telecommunication networks. Skylogic (part of the EUTELSAT Group), offers broadband Internet access via small and inexpensive bi-directional satellite dishes, known as "Tooway". It said that, with a new satellite (KASAT) to be launched at the end of 2010, higher-speed services can be provided to consumers in Eastern Europe at no extra cost, helping to bridge the digital divide for residents of rural areas especially.

Declaration of support

At a special session, the participating Heads of State and Government outlined their vision and full support for the Connect CIS initiative. And the summit as a whole issued the *Connect CIS Declaration*, stating a "common desire to build an inclusive and development-oriented information society, where people can achieve their full potential and improve their quality of life."

Recognizing "the important contribution of ICT in stimulating economic growth, employment and broader sustainable development in the region," as well as "the essential role of governments in devising



Jan Kubis, Executive Secretary, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), said it has several ICT-related activities in the region. Infrastructure, content and connectivity are vital for achieving an inclusive information society, he added

national e-strategies and establishing an enabling policy and regulatory framework to foster ICT investment," CIS leaders reaffirmed their commitment to achieving the goals of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). To this end, the declaration calls on partners from the telecommunication and ICT sector, development banks and financial institutions, international and regional organizations and civil society, "to mobilize human, financial and technical resources" for initiatives in the CIS region.

A look at the region's statistics

On the occasion of the *Connect CIS Summit*, a report was issued by ITU entitled "Information Society Statistical Profiles 2009: Commonwealth of Independent States". This describes how, over the past decade, key ICT services have increased throughout the region. Every year between 2003 and 2008, the number of fixed telephone lines, Internet users and mobile phone subscriptions grew twice as fast as the world average. At the end of 2008, the CIS region stood out as having the world's second highest



Pictured at the close of the summit are (left to right): Sami Al Basheer, Director of the ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau; Nurudin Mukhitdinov, Director General, Regional Commonwealth in the Field of the Communications; ITU Secretary-General Hamadoun I. Touré; Nikolai Pantelei, Minister of Communications and Informatization, Belarus, and Valery Timofeev, Director of the ITU Radiocommunication Bureau





mobile penetration rate at 113 for every 100 inhabitants, just behind Europe at 116 (see Figure 1).

However, when it comes to fixed access to broadband Internet services, the region has a penetration rate of just 4.6 per cent, and 0.9 per cent for mobile broadband, on average. This covers a wide disparity among countries, but, overall, it remains a major challenge to bring the benefits of broadband to more people, especially in rural areas.

The report suggests that policies targeted towards the development of the ICT sector are crucial for encouraging the adoption of ICT in the region. In many countries the market is still dominated by incumbent operators that have not yet expanded broadband services beyond major cities. However,

the picture is changing with an increase in deregulation, the emergence of competitors and a strong demand for high-speed Internet services. Mobile technologies and services are expected to help overcome the broadband divide, particularly in areas with limited fixed line infrastructure.

A number of recommendations are made in the report on ways to accelerate the expansion of Internet access and broadband in the CIS region. It concludes that policy makers and regulators have a major role to play in providing an environment that supports the successful development of the market and which attracts operators and investors.

The report is available in English and Russian at www.itu.int/publ/D-IND-RPM.CIS-2009/en.

