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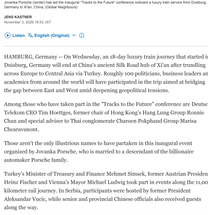

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Vienna entrepreneur takes leaders on lux train to China to foster ties

Jovanka Porsche hopes 18-day trip will lead to Davos-style meetings on Silk Road


Jovanka Porsche (center) has led the inaugural "Tracks to the Future" conference onboard a luxury train service from Duisburg, Germany to Xi'an, China. (Global Neighbours)

JENS KASTNER
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HAMBURG, Germany -- On Wednesday, an 18-day luxury train journey that started in Duisburg, Germany will end at China's ancient Silk Road hub of Xi'an after trundling across Europe to Central Asia via Turkey. Roughly 100 politicians, business leaders and academics from around the world will have participated in the trip aimed at bridging the gap between East and West amid deepening geopolitical tensions.

Among those who have taken part in the "Tracks to the Future" conference are Deutsche Telekom CEO Tim Hoettges, former chair of Hong Kong's Hang Lung Group Ronnie Chan and special advisor to Thai conglomerate Charoen Pokphand Group Marisa Chearavanont.

Those aren't the only illustrious names to have partaken in this inaugural event organized by Jovanka Porsche, who is married to a descendant of the billionaire automaker Porsche family.

Turkey's Minister of Treasury and Finance Mehmet Simsek, former Austrian President Heinz Fischer and Vienna's Mayor Michael Ludwig took part in events along the 11,000-kilometer rail journey. In Serbia, participants were hosted by former President Aleksandar Vucic, while senior and provincial Chinese officials also received guests along the way.

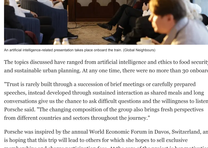

Among the participants are Global Neighbours CEO Wolfram Overlaque, who was formerly a UK resident coordinator in China, and Dylan Jang, chief financial officer of automotive intelligence company ECARX. (Screenshots from the "Tracks to the Future" Instagram account)

Porsche is an entrepreneur who built much of her wealth from investment banking and asset management in Hong Kong and Singapore. In 2022, she founded Global Neighbours, the Vienna-based think tank behind the train trip, with the aim of fostering political and economic dialogue between Europe, Asia and emerging markets.

"Having lived in Asia for many years, I have seen how easily perceptions of one another can diverge from reality, and how easily misunderstandings become when geopolitical tensions rise," Porsche wrote in an email to Nikkei Asia from the trip.

"Europe and Asia are more interdependent than ever, yet the space for constructive dialogue is shrinking. Governments must protect their national interests, and formal diplomacy remains indispensable, but official channels are often constrained by political sensitivities and short-term strategic calculations," she said.

She hopes that the more intimate format of the journey -- which was divided into three parts: Europe and Turkey, Central Asia and China -- will provide a backdrop more conducive to dialogue. Most participants joined for one or more sections, while a smaller group is traveling the whole way. Others have taken part in events at stops along the route.


An artificial intelligence-related presentation takes place onboard the train. (Global Neighbours)

The topics discussed have ranged from artificial intelligence and ethics to food security and sustainable urban planning. At any one time, there were no more than 30 onboard.

"Trust is rarely built through a succession of brief meetings or carefully prepared speeches, instead developed through sustained interaction as shared meals and long conversations give us the chance to ask difficult questions and the willingness to listen," Porsche said. "The changing composition of the group also brings fresh perspectives from different countries and sectors throughout the journey."

Porsche was inspired by the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, and is hoping that this trip will lead to others for which she hopes to sell exclusive memberships and charge participation fees. At the core of the project is her motivation to create a space where decision-makers can engage more openly, explore differences and identify common interests.

This matters directly for businesses, she said, as companies operating between Europe and Asia are exposed to every swing in political sentiment, leading to sudden changes in tariffs, export controls and regulations. Porsche believes that her platform could give business leaders more accurate information through direct communication and help to foster relationships that hold when official channels freeze.


Conference participants look part in events along the way and discussed topics like artificial intelligence and robotics. (Global Neighbours)

Above all, she said she wants participants to appreciate the complexity, diversity and dynamism of both regions.

As the European Union increasingly seeks to loosen Chinese companies' stranglehold over its domestic industries, Porsche called for "intellectual humility" from both sides.

"European debate tends to swing between economic opportunity and strategic risk. Both are relevant; neither is the whole picture," she said.

"China has shown the value of long-term planning, pragmatic problem-solving and the capacity to deliver infrastructure and development at scale, with its advances in green technology, artificial intelligence, robotics and urban development offering real lessons," Porsche said. "Europe brings considerable strengths in precision engineering, fundamental research, higher education and cultural innovation."

As for Central Asia, Porsche said that it shouldn't simply be considered a corridor between Europe and China, because countries in the region "have considerable potential to become more important partners for Europe in trade, investment, energy, connectivity and economic diversification."


Jovanka Porsche hopes that intimate dinners will give participants room to discuss issues that more formal settings may not encourage. (Golden Eagle Luxury Trains)

In Xi'an, Global Neighbours will draw together the insights gathered during the trip and publish a white paper, with the aim of enriching ongoing debates. Porsche wants the success of the conference to be judged by what continues after the journey.

"What counts is whether the conversations lead to new partnerships, joint projects, investment and continued engagement between people and institutions across Europe and Asia," Porsche said.

"My hope is that in five years, Europe-China relations will be less vulnerable to miscalculation and better at resolving disputes through dialogue. The measure of success will not be whether Europe and China agree on everything. It will be whether they can disagree without making cooperation impossible."

Jens Kastner is a contributing writer.

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