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StrategEast

STATE & IT EURASIAN FORUM

TBILISI, 15-16 SEPTEMBER 2020

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IT HUB
TBILISI



A year ago, our first StrategEast State and IT Eurasian Forum was held in Kyiv, and our key discussions were devoted to the need for the digital transformation of public services, the transition to a data-driven economy and the opportunities to create hundreds of thousands of new high-paid jobs within the IT industry in Eurasia.

We talked about the future – where digitalization will change the entire system of relationships between the state and the citizen, between the state and society.

But this future has become our reality much faster than we could imagine. As one of our virtual panel participants noted – 10 years of plans for digitalization were implemented in merely six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Amid the pandemic, it has been demonstrated how fast the tech industry is able to switch to remote work and to increase the generated revenues amid these hectic times.

StrategEast is a global organization operating in all Eurasian countries, the United States and the European Union.

For us, this Forum is not only a unique event, but also a unique opportunity to see how a global gathering of this scale is able to go through a digital transformation itself.

This last year has also provided us at StrategEast with a great opportunity to make a tangible contribution to the development of the Georgian IT industry.

Last February, together with one of the leading global engineering companies

EPAM Systems, we launched our IT HUB educational center in Tbilisi. Currently, close to 40 students are being trained in this center by the world-class IT practitioners working at EPAM Systems.

It has become an ideal model of how a public-private partnership should work in IT education. Georgia's Innovation and Technology Agency provided support from the government side, the Georgian Business and Technology University assisted us in finding high-level applicants, and the best coaches were provided by EPAM.

We started at the end of February, just several weeks before the pandemic outbreak. And amid the lockdown, we've reformatted our educational program to a one-on-one remote format. This model allowed us to renew the training in mid-May, and now we have obtained the first tangible result. The first IT HUB graduates got their first jobs working remotely for global IT companies and, most importantly, without leaving their own country.

But this is far from being the sole result of our activity. We are proud that the Georgian government has already identified IT as a priority, as evidenced by the rapid approval of a special 5% tax regime for IT companies in Georgia.

Yet another important Forum outcome is one of the leading global engineering companies EPAM Systems starting its operation in Georgia. Our mission is to keep this tendency to integrate Georgia and the whole of Eurasia into the global IT production chain.

The StrategEast IT HUB in Tbilisi is not just a local project, but a scalable model that is planned to be expanded to other Eurasian countries that require an initial push – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and other countries in Eurasia.

Moreover, the remote education model allows us to expand it immediately without being limited by the pandemic. I must admit that at this stage, to expand the IT HUB, we need support

from international development agencies and international financial institutions who promote the digital economy in Eurasia.

StrategEast is proud to be a consistent driving force, transforming the economies of Eurasian countries from natural-resource-based models to knowledge-driven ones.

I am happy that the StrategEast State and IT Eurasian Forum is becoming the platform that determines the trends in IT development in Eurasia for the coming years.

With that we expect that this program will become self-sustainable in an extremely short period. Being a scalable program, StrategEast IT HUB is adjustable to students of any country (with the tuition language of the program being English).

By implementing this ambitious program in the Eurasian region, we're involving a critical mass of local youth in a transparent, accountable economy, based on the rule of law and private property protection and connecting them to the global digital economy.

Anatoly Motkin,
President, StrategEast

Key speakers



Professor Beata Javorcik

Chief Economist, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development

“Automation is going to profoundly affect the labor market. It is going to primarily affect jobs in manufacturing sectors such as textiles, food products agriculture, wood products and transport. While services – financial, legal, telecom, computer programming and education – are less likely to be affected. This has a very big implication for the ways we should be educating young people and preparing them for entry into the labor force. As automation progresses, many of the jobs for manual workers are likely to disappear.”



Dr. Kaush Arha

Senior Adviser for Strategic Engagement to USAID Administrator

“Technology is not only a great leveler around the world, but it is also a great disruptor. However, the question is not to prevent the evolution of the new technology, but to manage it to the best ability of most of your citizens. In a development agency, one would engage all fronts to do that: the government, the private sector, and the civil society. You would engage government agencies that deal with digital activities. Most importantly is the engagement with the private sector as the government cannot do all the planning and foresee the future – that comes from the private sector. It can tell where the industry is going, and where the new opportunities are. Civil society serves as a bridge between the government and the private sector, helping to keep them accountable.”



Arkadiy Dobkin

Founder and President, EPAM Systems

“We are very committed to the region. We at EPAM have created a significant educational infrastructure: Belarus, Ukraine, Armenia, Kazakhstan. And Georgia is next. I truly believe that the start of our operation activity in Georgia will accelerate the whole IT industry and that the community will create the opportunity to keep all the talent in the country.”



Sebastian Molineus

World Bank Regional Director for the South Caucasus

“The digitalization of the public services is, of course, not the silver bullet, but it is a golden opportunity to further drive growth and increase transparency, inclusion, accountability and, ultimately, trust in the government. There are six blocks for that: clear strategy with a real commitment and political will; digital infrastructure; laws and regulations to manage the risks; education; ecosystem and awareness-raising.”



Evgeny Koren

Country Manager, Microsoft Belarus

“Applying universal solutions to the digital transformation seems doable and realistic to me because what we observe in the region is that all Eurasian countries have the same challenges: rising citizen expectations on services; budgetary constraints; changing demography; global competition for investments; access to infrastructure and technology; and the public sector reform agenda. I’m pretty sure that we can find a universal approach for all those issues.”



Catalin Gherman

Deputy Head of Cooperation, Delegation of the European Union in Georgia

“There is clear evidence that digital technologies have brought a lot of benefits to many areas: not only the economy, but also culture, education, public administration reform, civil service, and many others. At the time of the pandemic, we all moved to the digital world – both on an individual and business level. Accordingly, the governments had to adapt their policies too. When it comes to digital transformation, in the EaP region there are a few focal areas that have been selected by the EU to be focused on: increase access to broadband connectivity and digital infrastructure, improve the usage of digital services, enhance awareness of the digital economy and develop digital skills; plus the creation of jobs in the digital sector.”

State in a smartphone: Digital transformation of public services



Panelists: **Sebastian Molineus**, World Bank Regional Director for the South Caucasus | **Bokhodir Ayupov**, Chief Investment Officer, IT-Park Uzbekistan | **Oleksandr Bornyakov**, Deputy Minister of Digital Transformation of Ukraine | **Evgeny Koren**, Country Manager, Microsoft Belarus | **Zurab Sanikidze**, Chairman of Public Service Development Agency, Ministry of Justice of Georgia | **Vitalie Tarlev**, Secretary of State for IT&Communications, Ministry of Economy and Infrastructure of the Republic of Moldova

Bokhodir Ayupov, Chief Investment Officer, IT-Park Uzbekistan

“One of the reasons why the IT industry and the digitalization of the economy receive so much support in Uzbekistan is because the administration of the country realizes that IT industry is one of the sure ways of addressing the problem of our country being a doubly landlocked country.”

Oleksandr Bornyakov, Deputy Minister of Digital Transformation of Ukraine

“We do have great support from our President in implementing digitalization processes in the country. But an important lesson is that political will can change, but if people are engaged then there is no turning back in the digitalization process.”

The future tech labor market in Eurasia



Panelists: **Anatoly Motkin**, President, StrategEast | **R. Michael Cowgill**, President, American Chamber of Commerce in Georgia | **Christopher W. Edwards**, USAID Regional Mission Director for Central Asia | **Catalin Gherman**, Deputy Head of Cooperation, Delegation of the European Union in Georgia | **Michael Honigstein**, Political and Economic Counselor, U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi, Georgia | **Irakli Nadareishvili**, Deputy Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia

Christopher W. Edwards, USAID Regional Mission Director for Central Asia

“What USAID is trying to do here in Central Asia is to increase the regional connection. Because if there is a strong regional connection, then these countries have a greater economic base in order to create jobs. And job creation is the primary focus of our portfolio. One of the key aspects of USAID’s work in Central Asia is to support the regional cooperation and connectivity among these countries and their neighbors. We believe that only by working together, will countries be able to reduce barriers to economic growth and job creation while creating opportunities for investment – not only regional but international investment.”

Irakli Nadareishvili, Deputy Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia

“No doubt that the economies with the most flexible labor markets, education and legal systems, as well as infrastructure, will benefit the most in the global innovative system. However, at the same time, the ultimate effect on labor markets and the potential increase in inequality is also widely debated nowadays. Challenges for transition economies include the widening of technology and knowledge gaps and its implication on skills, which is also the case in Georgia.”

The IT industry in Georgia



Panelists: **Mariam Sumbadze**, Director, Georgian ICT Cluster | **Giorgi Alexidze**, CIO, Axios Holding | **Avtandil Kasradze**, Chairman, Georgia's Innovation and Technology Agency | **Givi Sartania**, CEO, Wandio LLC | **David Zerah**, Partner, Mentor, Director, Webiz

Avtandil Kasradze, Chairman, Georgia's Innovation and Technology Agency

"There are no borders for the IT industry; the tech workers should be competitive globally. In order to meet the demand from the private sector, various educational programs are being elaborated in Georgia to leverage existing talents in IT and STEM, which is giving the country more attraction and ensuring that our workforce is globally competitive.

To pursue socially inclusive and economically sustainable growth, we expand the tech parks network in Georgia, securing inclusive access to all Georgians despite where they live, which contributes to sustainable development."

Giorgi Alexidze, CIO, Axios Holding

"The recent investments made to support local entrepreneurship are great, but without a sustainable longer running strategy of supplying trained professionals, those startups (due to the lack of local resources) will eventually have to outsource, or even worse, move their businesses outside of the country."

The digital financial solutions



Panelists: **Giorgi Iashvili**, Co-Founder, CEO, Georgian Information Security Association | **Natan Avidan**, Founder, CEO, Kernolab, Advisor, BigWallet | **Nikoloz Gagua**, Deputy Minister of Finance of Georgia | **Natia Gvazava**, CLO, Identomat Inc. | **David Papuashvil**, Deputy Head of the Specialized Risk Department, National Bank of Georgia

Nikoloz Gagua, Deputy Minister of Finance of Georgia

"During the pandemic, digital transformation can lead to the biggest win, and it is very important to use this opportunity. I am sure that in several years from now we'll see how this period contributed to the digitalization of society. Currently, we are witnessing how new financial digital solutions emerge, and this is a permanent shift. Analyzing the challenges during this period, the Georgian government has noticed the increase of risks in cybersecurity. However, I am sure we will be able to overcome the challenge and enhance cybersecurity significantly."

Natan Avidan, Founder, CEO, Kernolab, Advisor, BigWallet

"Online fintech businesses maintain the highest security level and always comply with the highest standards. A lot of work is being done towards both the regulation of cybersecurity and towards solving cybersecurity issues. Currently, the developers of fintech products have been paying so much attention and investing so much money in cybersecurity that I think we are well protected from cyber threats."

Central Asia as a digital hub of Eurasia



Panelists: **Baizhan Kanafin**, CEO, Documentolog | **Pavel Koktyshev**, Deputy Chairman of the Board, Zerde National Infocommunication Holding | **Bakhtovar Makhmadullozoda**, Head of Department of Social Sphere Development, Ministry of Economic Development and Trade of Tajikistan | **Sandjar Saidkhodjaev**, Digital Development Specialist, Digital Development Practice, World Bank | **Aziz Soltobaev**, Founder, Kyrgyz Internet Society; Co-Author of National Program of Digital Transformation of Kyrgyz Republic

Sandjar Saidkhodjaev

"With much of the activities switching online during the lockdown, the data traffic increased dramatically. In this context, the World Bank recognizes the importance of the digital economy and broadband infrastructure development and supports the processes of digital transformation in its partner countries, including the Central Asian region. One of the big programs being implemented there is the Digital CASA Regional Program, with the main objectives to increase the access to affordable internet connectivity, to attract private investments in the IT sector and to strengthen the capacity of these countries to deliver quality services.

According to our study, the transformation of the telecom sector in Uzbekistan can increase GDP growth by at least 0.8% until 2025 and create between 30 000 and 200 000 innovative, new jobs during that period."

Pavel Koktyshev

"I can tell that digital development is the number one priority for Kazakhstan. The country has an IT development ministry; vice-ministers who are in charge of the IT development under major ministries; and the whole range of instruments from the public policy perspective to nurture the innovative ecosystem. On the other hand, to ensure IT ecosystem development and startups' development, there should be a strong market as entrepreneurs are the change agents for digital transformation. The government is ready to step aside from the process if there is a market in place."

Startups in Eurasia – Investments and environment



Panelists: **Colin Donohue**, Director, Startup Grind Tbilisi; Founder, Starpoint Ventures | **Rashad Azizov**, Head of Innovations and Digital Development Department, Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies of Azerbaijan | **Alfredo Coppola**, Co-CEO, US Market Access Center | **Mariam Lashkhi**, Deputy Chairperson, Georgia's Innovation and Technology Agency | **Toghrul Samadov**, Founder, CEO, Buglance | **Dilshod Zufarov**, CEO, Uzbekistan Venture Capital Association

Rashad Azizov, Head of Innovations and Digital Development Department, Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies of Azerbaijan

"Azerbaijan is taking serious steps to improve the ecosystem of startups. We have four technology parks and 15 incubation centers. According to the country's legislation, startups are exempt from taxes for 10 years of their income from activities in state-created technology parks and VAT on the import of machinery, technological equipment and facilities, property and land they use. Also, startups are exempt from customs duties for seven years for the import of machinery, technological equipment and devices."

Mariam Lashkhi, Deputy Chairperson, Georgia's Innovation and Technology Agency

"The 'black swan' of 2020 – the coronavirus – has reshaped the approaches of various countries and transformed the globe into an agile structured startup. The pandemic has proven that if countries are ready to step back from the bureaucracy and adjust to the global challenges, they will succeed. I am very proud to be a representative of Georgia, the country which before the pandemic outbreak has reshaped the economy from a traditional to an innovation-driven model. The successful reforms that have been conducted in recent years have promoted innovation, entrepreneurship and startup ecosystem development."

Digital transformation of SMEs

Panelists: **Viktor Baramia**, Senior Program Manager, Europe Foundation | **John Hugo Freddy Braeckveldt**, Chairman of the Board, European Business Association in Georgia | **Irakli Gogoladze**, Director, Iknow LLC; Founding member, Georgian ICT Cluster | **Ihar Kruhlik**, SME Digital Development, EPAM Systems | **Ifeyinwa Uchenna Onugha**, Senior Private Sector Specialist, World Bank

Ifeyinwa Uchenna Onugha, Senior Private Sector Specialist, World Bank

“When we talk about digitalization, there is a risk that we casually use this word without understanding what it really means for business owners. People on the ground with limited resources need to adapt to the current coronavirus crisis. A lot of the emphasis at this point has been on moving services online. But not every business can provide online services (think of hairdressers or bakers). Some countries do not have digital payment systems and the necessary infrastructure to allow that. We work with some countries that officially have 100% internet coverage. But what does that coverage mean? It turns out that some coverage may be good enough only for social networking, but not sufficient for eight hours of work or several hours of study a day. In other countries, internet speeds and bandwidth are good enough, but people lack the necessary hardware to work efficiently from home.”



Ihar Kruhlik, SME Digital Development, EPAM Systems

“The question is not whether to implement digital transformation for SMEs, but rather how to do it faster. According to the surveys, about 80% of SMEs are not taking full advantage of digital capabilities for two main reasons. First, they are simply not aware of the technologies, and, secondly, they do not believe that technological solutions are relevant to their particular business cases. Digital transformation should be treated not as a cost, but as an investment.”

Global development agencies in Eurasia



Alexander Gogoberidze, Regional Manager for the South Caucasus, Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation

“The COVID-19 pandemic showed that ICT is a really important sector and that it has become an integral part of our lives. We at Helvetas are very keen to tap into this sector, especially when it involves an increasingly large number of young people. At the same time, prior to implementing any program, we should conduct a market system analysis to identify the most relevant sectors to start piloting a project.”

Panelists: **Ketevan Gabelia**, Associate Banker, EBRD | **Dr. Kaush Arha**, Senior Adviser for Strategic Engagement to USAID Administrator | **Alexander Gogoberidze**, Regional Manager for the South Caucasus, Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation | **Oleksii Sobolev**, CEO, Prozorro.Sale

Ketevan Gabelia, Associate Banker, EBRD

“In order to successfully implement the IT solutions, a must-have ingredient is the willingness of various actors. IT development brings some disruption to the labor market. However, certain solutions do not get full support from all the market actors, and the task and challenge is to conduct the changes to make the transition smooth.”

COVID-19 – Technology as a remedy



Panelists: **Kseniya Bukshina**, Director, Tak publishing | **Dr. Gregory Asmolov**, Lecturer in Digital Entrepreneurship and Marketing, Department of Digital Humanities, King's College London | **Romi Davidor**, Director & Co-founder, CatalystIL community | **Jonas Onland**, Senior Advisor, Innovation & Upscaling, Member Partnership Digital Transformation of the Urban Agenda, Association of Dutch Municipalities

Dr. Gregory Asmolov, Lecturer in Digital Entrepreneurship and Marketing, Department of Digital Humanities, King's College London

“We are at a point of transformation from the discussion about the role of digital technologies to address the crisis to the discussion of the role of technologies to address the new normal that emerged as a result of the pandemic. Right now, it is less about how to track the virus and produce protective equipment, and more about addressing big challenges of employment, education, and our everyday lives. But technology is not the remedy, it is only a part of the remedy. We should be sensitive about the role of innovation in different sociocultural contexts and facilitate a dialogue of experience exchange from different countries.”

Romi Davidor, Director & Co-founder, CatalystIL community

“There is a lot of fear regarding using new technologies. But in the case of the coronavirus, we couldn't say “Let's wait a year, we'll think about what we can do with it and be better prepared”. The pandemic struck suddenly, without warning. Many industries got a glimpse of how they can be technological too; they can get through digital transformation.”

Artificial intelligence in Eurasia



Panelists: **Ana Chubinidze**, AI Policy Exchange Expert; Founding Editorial Board Member, Springer Nature | **Irakli Beridze**, Head, Centre for AI and Robotics, UNICRI, United Nations | **Dr. Khatuna Burkadze**, Professor, Business and Technology University | **Dachi Choladze**, CEO, PulsarAI | **Nino Esakia**, Government and Public Sector Leader, EY Georgia | **Gary Fowler**, CEO, President, and Co-founder, GSD Venture Studios

Nino Esakia, Government and Public Sector Leader, EY Georgia

“An EY study showed that fintech is the driving force of AI in Georgia. In many cases, fintech clients are the biggest in the ICT sector. We all know how many benefits AI can bring to the development of our society. But there are some risks to be aware of and addressed – proper regulation framework and ethical aspects of the AI use.”

Irakli Beridze, Head, Centre for AI and Robotics, UNICRI, United Nations

“The UN Secretary-General, in June 2020, issued a roadmap on digital cooperation, aimed at advancing a safer, more equitable digital world, one which will lead to a brighter and more prosperous future for all. The United Nations fully supports its Member States in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals by harnessing the benefits of technologies, such as AI. We are at the stage when this technology requires a very systematic approach, and governments should be taking it extremely seriously. I would encourage all UN Member States to adopt AI strategies and to identify priority areas to focus on. At the same time, any technology which will be developed should be in a manner that does not erode human rights, deepen inequality or exacerbate discrimination. We should be supporting people to live better lives.”

New education for the new economy



Panelists: **Irakli Kashivadze**, CEO, Future Laboratory Georgia | **Nino Enukidze**, Rector, Business and Technology University | **Tamar Kitiashvili**, Deputy Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia | **Dr. Sandra Loughlin**, Managing Principal and Head, Learning Advisory Practice, EPAM Systems

Nino Enukidze, Rector, Business and Technology University

"If we are going towards the digital transformation of industries and we want to support the economies in the countries, the education sector should definitely become the major driving force for transformational processes. In the technology era, there is a huge opportunity for the education sector to fill the gaps and raise students who will be appropriate for the job market."

Tamar Kitiashvili, Deputy Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia

"The objective of the education system is to be as flexible and agile as possible to develop together with the economy. Almost every country's education system finds itself a bit outdated compared to the dynamics happening across the globe and cannot be considered a frontrunner for the requirements of the new economy. To help the citizens acquire key competences and skills for the labor market, we should start at pre-school level. The educational system should be able to accommodate all types of learning processes and novelties and leave room for cooperation with the private sector to become as open as possible."

Digital resilience: Sustaining digital transformation



Panelists: **Rafal Rohozinski**, Principal, SecDev Group | **Oleg Petrov**, Senior Digital Development Specialist, World Bank | **Altynbek Ismailov**, Chairman of the State Committee of Information Technology and Communications of Kyrgyz Republic | **Arman Abdrasilov**, Chair of JSC National Infocommunication Holding Zerde | **Bobur Abdullaev**, Director of Amity University; Irakli Gvenetadze, Independent ICT expert, Former Chairman of the Georgian Data Exchange Agency | **Melissa Hathaway**, President of Hathaway Global Strategies LLC, Former Cybersecurity Advisor, George W. Bush and Barack Obama Administrations, Harvard Kennedy School, Former Senior Advisor on Cyber Security | **Sebastian Molineus**, World Bank Regional Director for the South Caucasus

Oleg Petrov, Senior Digital Development Specialist, World Bank

"Now is the time to invest in digital transformation and digital resilience. I think we all learned that lesson, and in a hard way, that if you are not prepared for the next shock, you will be in a big trouble, and that a lot of countries are suffering as a result of insufficient digital readiness. This is what World Bank Digital Development Global practice is all about. We are here to work with our clients and partners in various countries to invest in the foundations of digital transformation and digital resilience."

Melissa Hathaway, President of Hathaway Global Strategies LLC, Former Cybersecurity Advisor, George W. Bush and Barack Obama Administrations, Harvard Kennedy School, Former Senior Advisor on Cyber Security

"No countries are talking about resilience the same way they talk about their digital strategy. They are adapting digital strategies and not having a commensurate conversation about security and resilience. It's now the time; if we are going to have that digital transformation, make the resilience and security of your infrastructure top of mind and top of the conversation."

Participants

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Bobur Abdullaev Amity University

Sergey Ageenko EPAM Systems

Giorgi Alexidze Axios Holding

Dr. Kaush Arha USAID

Vakhtang Asanidze StrategEast

Dr. Gregory Asmolov King's College London

Natan Avidan Kernolab; BigWallet

Bokhodir Ayupov IT-Park Uzbekistan

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Natia Bantsadze Bank of Georgia

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Ana Chubinidze Springer Nature

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Arkadiy Dobkin EPAM Systems

Colin Donohue Startup Grind Tbilisi; Starpoint Ventures

Christopher W. Edwards USAID

Nino Enukidze Business and Technology University

Nino Esakia EY Georgia

Gary Fowler GSD Venture Studios

Ketevan Gabelia EBRD

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Alexander Gogoberidze Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation

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Natia Gvazava Identomat

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StrategEast State and IT Eurasian Forum

The State and IT Eurasian Forum is an annual event held by the StrategEast center that serves as a unique platform for dialogue between governments and the leaders of the IT industry.

The StrategEast State and IT Eurasian Forum brings together the representatives of global and local tech companies, governments, international financial institutions, development agencies and civil society organizations. It provides an opportunity to discuss what needs to be done in order to enhance the innovative economy across the region and to assist Eurasian countries with their integration into the global economic and security system.



About StrategEast

StrategEast is a strategic center with the mission to reinforce the values of the rule of law and private-property protection in Eurasian and Baltic countries through the transition from natural-resource-based to knowledge-driven economies. StrategEast is a registered 501(c)3 organization based in the United States with regional offices in Ukraine and Georgia.

Our work is focused on the 14 countries that proclaimed or restored their independence after the collapse of the USSR: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

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StrategEast eastern mind western values

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