

GSMA M360 EURASIA 2023 BRINGS MOBILE INDUSTRY LEADERS TO BAKU

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In mid-May Baku convened regional leaders and international experts of the mobile and digital space to discuss key trends, opportunities, and challenges of the industry. For the first time, Azerbaijan became a host of the international GSMA M360 Eurasia conference that unifies the regional ICT ecosystem to discover, develop and deliver the innovation that is foundational to positive business environments and societal change.

Brought to Baku in partnership with the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport of Azerbaijan and host sponsor, Azerbaijan's leading mobile operator Azercell, the two-day event acknowledged Azerbaijan's aspiration to become an emerging digital power in the region.

The list of speakers of the GSMA M360 EURASIA 2023 included the Minister of Digital Development and Transport of the Republic of Azerbaijan Rashad Nabiyeu, CEO of Azercell Zarina Zeynalova, General Director of GSMA Mats Granryd, and senior managers of such international organizations as Huawei, Google, the International

Telecommunication Union, McKinsey, KT Corporation, Nokia, BP, PwC, Ericsson, World Bank, etc.

The gathering facilitated inspirational keynotes, engaging panel discussions, and insightful case studies across mobile technology and adjacent industries, with a focus on digital resilience for future prosperity, building stronger customer connections, 5G, the future of infrastructure, IoT, AI and machine learning, fintech, cybersecurity, and more.

Opening the first iteration of the GSMA's M360 Series in 2023, Mats Granryd, General Director of GSMA, addressed the audience with the report on the digital divide: "Since the first mobile phone call 50 years ago, our industry has evolved, adapted and advanced the world around us, serving 5.4 billion unique customers. As we enter the era of intelligent connectivity, it feels like anything is possible, but it has also never been more important for us to focus on closing the digital divide. Together we must keep working to build a firm foundation for the next generation of intelligent connectivity and ensure that no one is left behind in our global digital economy."

Speaking at the event, Azerbaijan's Minister of Digital Development and Transport Rashad Nabiyeu noted that the

COVID pandemic had acted as a catalyst for accelerating digital transformation and development in many countries, making the topic of the event very much relevant. As for Azerbaijan, the country continues to invest in infrastructural projects to address the issues of a digital divide.

"By the end of 2024, we expect all households in Azerbaijan to be provided with the Internet. In this respect, infrastructure is a major part of our work," he said. According to the Minister, the country also pays attention to preparing digitally skilled human resources, cyber security, and proper regulation of the sector.

CEO of Azercell Zarina Zeynalova, in turn, reiterated the commitment of her company to promote innovation and progress in the telecom industry.

"As the providers of mobile connectivity and communication services, we are at the forefront of this complex digital ecosystem and have a unique perspective on opportunities as well as first-hand insight into the challenges of this rapidly evolving landscape," she said, adding that the company has focused on investing its efforts and resources in three major directions: the reliable system and infrastructure, effective processes and, most importantly, the right people in the right roles at the right time.

Mrs. Zeynalova noted that one of the most critical agendas for Azercell is to cover Azerbaijan's liberated territories in Karabakh: "In line with the 2022–2026 strategy for socio-economic development of the country endorsed by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Mr. Ilham Aliyev, we continued integrating advanced digital technologies in Karabakh. We believe these technologies will contribute to the establishment of modern social and business infrastructures in these areas, further boosting construction and restoration efforts in rebuilding these territories." Azercell has already installed over 100 new 4G stations in the liberated territories and plans to increase their number to 190.

Exploring the impact of technology on society, the role of innovation in driving progress, and the importance of preparing for and responding to disruptive events, the industry leaders discussed the latest trends and best strategies for staying ahead of the curve in an ever-changing technological environment.

The speech sessions showed that digitalization across verticals directly contributes to GDPs across the world. Digital technologies are transforming various industries, shaping the future of cities and economies, and enabling ubiquitous digitalization.

The participants of the event explored the evolving landscape of business and the critical importance of adapting to the digital age. The discussion delved into the fundamental changes required in organizational structures and processes to fully digitize an enterprise and stay competitive. It was noted that the impact of digitalization on society is increasing, with new services appearing and existing technologies transforming into digital formats.

At the event in Baku, the GSMA presented a report on the digital divide in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. It shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that digitalization can significantly improve access to services and expand opportunities. Across this backdrop, countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia are undergoing a digital revolution, driven by ambitious government digital transformation initiatives and a trend towards greater

Zarina Zeynalova
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digitalization. In recent years, authorities across the region have committed to medium-to-long-term initiatives to coordinate the formulation and implementation of their digitalization plans. At the national level, governments have also announced digitalization strategies to fast-track the digital transformation of key sectors of the economy and wider society. In Azerbaijan, for example, digital transformation is a key part of the national goal for socioeconomic development by 2030.

The report highlights that digital connectivity is fundamental to the realization of the digital transformation plans. It is a basis for creating and distributing innovative digital solutions. In the South Caucasus and Central Asia, mobile technology is fundamental to expanding connectivity. More than 40% of the population of these regions live in rural, and often mountainous, areas. In such places, mobile connectivity is typically the first and often the only form of access to Internet connectivity. While 45 million people are now using mobile Internet across the eight countries in the region, a digital divide remains, with nearly 50 million unconnected people at risk of missing out on the benefits of mobile Internet. In 2022, the usage gap was widest in Georgia and Turkmenistan at around 52% and 50% of the population, respectively, while it was the lowest in Azerbaijan at 36% compared to the global average of 41%. Moreover, Azerbaijan is implementing the 'smart villages' concept, which has the potential to transform the lives and livelihood of rural dwellers through digitally enabled services.

GSMA notes that closing the region's digital divide will require substantial collaborative actions. To this end, governments and policymakers should implement measures that can attract investment in the deployment of network infrastructure in underserved areas, create innovative digital services to stimulate demand, and address the various non-infrastructure barriers to mobile Internet adoption.

Collaboration is already occurring, but there is scope for more interaction to increase digital skills and literacy, improve affordability, and enable a policy environment that can accelerate growth in local content, services and applications.

The discussion sessions concluded that bringing high-quality broadband to every household in the shortest time will have a domino effect on connecting new users and bringing new opportunities for the unconnected, as well as a positive impact on the mobile operators, governments, and the economy when they finally go digital.

