

## REGIONAL COMPETITIVENESS INITIATIVE VOL 3 ISSUE 4 DECEMBER 2009

HIGHLIGHTING SUCCESSES OF USAID COMPETITIVENESS PROJECTS THROUGHOUT THE E&E REGION

### RECENT IT EVENTS STRENGTHEN REGIONAL NETWORKS

One of RCI's missions is to foster collaboration and networking among IT companies, associations, and regional governments. Three events in the region continued this goal.

#### BULGARIA

The Regional Workshop "Building a Sustainable Regional ICT Training and Certification Network" took place on October 7-8, 2009, in Sofia, Bulgaria. The event was a joint initiative of the Regional Competitiveness Initiative and the European Software Institute – Bulgaria.

Forty-four participants from 10 countries throughout SEE and the Caucasus attended the 2-day event. USAID Missions and Projects representatives discussed each country's specific needs and interests in the area of IT training, education, and standardization. Professionals from leading ICT businesses, such as Cisco, HP, and Microsoft, shared their experiences and successful models, in the area of international training and certification, enabling the sustainable development of high-quality business practices.



ABOVE Denny Robertson, Ciarra O'Higgins and George Sharkov in Sofia, Bulgaria.

#### GEORGIA

More than 200 participants from 10 countries participated in the 2-day conference aimed at sharing IT best practices in the public and private sectors. Participants viewed presentations of successful IT projects and solutions from Georgia, Estonia, Bulgaria, and Armenia. Five awards for private sector initiatives were also presented. RCI contributed to the conference by funding the participation of speakers from the



ABOVE Participants receive awards at the first Georgia IT conference.

Western Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe and the Caucasus.

The IT Innovation Conference, which was sponsored by the E-Governance Commission in cooperation with the American Chamber of Commerce in Georgia, aimed at promoting the significance of information technology as an engine for socio-economic development in Georgia. The conference also provided an opportunity for networking with stakeholders as well as building awareness about the importance of IT among high-level governmental officials, private sector representatives, and wider society.

Government officials, policy makers, donor organizations, business sector representatives, international IT experts, and NGOs from ten countries participated in the conference, which was followed by the first Georgian IT Innovation Award ceremony.

For reactions from participants, see the last page.

#### MACEDONIA

In Ohrid on November 18-20, the 6<sup>th</sup> MASIT Open Days Conference was held. MASIT, the Macedonian ICT Chamber of Commerce ([www.masit.org.mk](http://www.masit.org.mk)), organized the conference, which focused on electronic communications and broadband technologies as key drivers towards successful ICT markets. It was the first time participants from the Caucasus and Central Europe attended this conference.

For more information please contact Anita Nikova at [anita@masit.org.mk](mailto:anita@masit.org.mk)

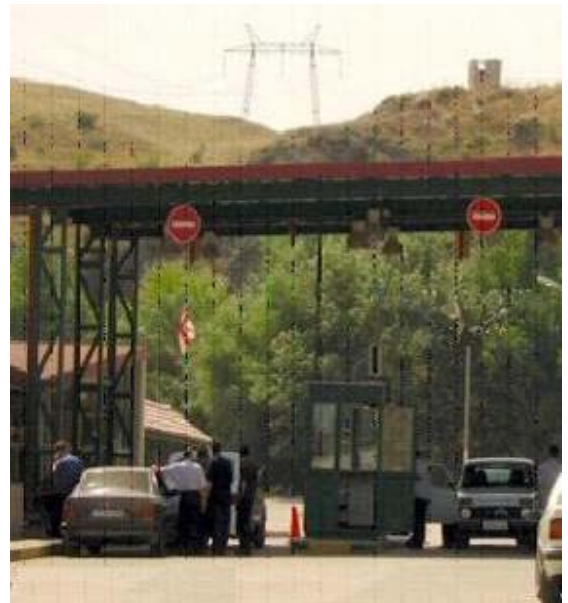
## GEORGIA IMPROVES BORDERS, TRADE

Over the last two years, the Ministry of Finance and the State Revenue Service of Georgia have launched a series of customs reforms to expedite clearance procedures and promote efficient allocations of State Revenue Service resources.

USAID Business Climate Reform project provided technical assistance streamlining border clearance procedures – resulting in an

estimated savings to businesses and government of more than \$380 million annually. For example, one reform was an automated risk management system to identify suspect cargoes replaced physical inspections of all freight.

According to a World Bank report, customs reforms in Georgia have reduced the time to import to less than 10 days in 2009 from more than 50 days in 2005.



ABOVE LEFT Before: Red Bridge customs in 2005.

ABOVE After: The improved border.

## KPEP ASSISTS KOSOVO PEPPER FARMERS, FACILITATES EXPORT CONTRACTS



ABOVE A farmer inspects his pepper yield. KPEP purchased pepper planting machines for farmers in the village of Krusha e Madhe.

Nearly 200 farmers, members of Perdrini Association in Krusha e Madhe in Kosovo, have significantly improved their situation in this past pepper season thanks to the USAID Kosovo Private Enterprise Program (KPEP). KPEP assisted them with the purchase of pepper planting machines,

set-up of testing and cultivation of new varieties, and identification of new markets.

Krusha e Madhe is a village in West Kosovo with more than 8,000 inhabitants who earn a living mostly as pepper farmers. Collectively, they cultivate about 500 hectares and the seasonal yield of the traditional variety of peppers is about 20,000 metric tons (MT).

Planting is traditionally done by hand. KPEP, through its grant program, purchased two pepper seedling planting machines for the Association, which allowed the farmers to plant their pepper seedlings in much less time. KPEP also employed two agronomists to advise the farmers on pepper cultivation and to maintain pepper test plots with new varieties of peppers, which yielded three times more than the traditional variety, which yielded 40 MT per hectare.

In addition, KPEP facilitated the first export contracts for first-time exporter Perdrini, with two vegetable processing companies from Macedonia, Albania, and Serbia. As a result in this season, the Perdrini Association exported over 2,000 MT of peppers valued at €500,000.

Demand for Perdrini peppers is increasing and the farmers are now working on producing new hybrid pepper varieties that will increase quality and quantity. The pepper cultivation soon will become a much more profitable business for the farmers of Perdrini Association and of the Rahovec/Orahovec area in general.

## TOURISM ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSES ECO-FRIENDLY TOURISM

On October 1 RCI held its Fourth Regional Tourism Round Table in Podgorica, Montenegro with 36 participants from eight countries. The current issue of the event was traditionally dedicated to information sharing and exchanging ideas on successful developments in tourism in South East Europe. The 36 tourism specialists participating from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, and USA applied their knowledge and experience into discussing



ABOVE Roundtable in Podgorica

opportunities for the development of quality standardization on eco-friendly tourism in the region. Equally important, the attendees had the chance to meet and have specific conversations with potential business partners for the implementation of cross-border tourism projects, such as viticulture tours and mountain hiking trails. The preparation of the National Geographic Traveler supplement on the Western Balkans was among the main topics of discussion at the meeting.

## NEW ONLINE TOURISM PORTAL STARTED FOR BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Exploring Bosnia and Herzegovina ([www.exploringbh.com](http://www.exploringbh.com)) is



a new tourism Portal launched in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BH) in late August with assistance from the Excellence in Innovation (EI) project.

The Portal is a one-stop shop that attracts in-bound tourism and improves the

competitiveness of Bosnia Herzegovina's tourism companies in international markets. ExploringBH provides marketing,

booking and online payment services for BH hotels and tour operators, as well as organizing conferences and seminars for local and international clients. Through ExploringBH, visitors can choose from hotels in every area of the country, explore BH's exciting events and activities, book unique tours, and more. ExploringBH organized all of the logistics for the Tourism Regional Roundtable in Sarajevo in late May 2009.

The EI project, which is helping create self-sustainable e-BIZ enterprises like ExploringBH, is funded by USAID and the Norwegian Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

For more information, please contact Mr. Sanscho Ramhorst at [sramhorst@edc.org](mailto:sramhorst@edc.org)

## AGBIZ HELPS MACEDONIAN PRODUCE COMPANIES IDENTIFY IMPROVEMENTS

For more than two years AgBiz has helped Macedonian fresh produce companies improve their export competitiveness by providing support related to product handling, grading, packaging and food safety. Profitable expansion of the Macedonian fresh produce industry requires cost and quality competitiveness improvements. Macedonian companies need to take steps to improve in these critical areas or there will be a decline in export sales and profitability

To help customers enhance their post harvest handling procedures and practices, AgBiz engaged a highly qualified international expert to advise, educate, train, and increase the capacity of domestic fresh produce operators to adopt modern, competitive post harvest handling practices and technologies. AgBiz brought Dr. David Picha to Macedonia to provide high level technical support to the country's fresh produce exporters.

"[Macedonia has] many sunny days and excellent climatic conditions, favorable for growing different agricultural products which are in demand in EU and U.S. markets," Dr. Picha said. "With modest, not expensive investments in post harvest handling enhancements, Macedonian products can be successfully positioned in EU retail supermarkets."

Dr. Picha visited 15 of the largest exporters of Macedonian fresh produce. Each received onsite technical assistance for improving their post harvest handling. Then, a one-day technical workshop, "How to Improve Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Post-Harvest Handling for Export," was organized by AgBiz.

Representatives from six companies attended. As a result, Macedonian fresh produce companies have gained expert advice on harvesting techniques, steps for preparing fresh products for market, cooling and storing, humidity, efficient operations and standards and conditions for pack houses. Many of the recommended techniques can be implemented at a very modest cost.



ABOVE Dr. David Picha meets with producers. AgBiz connected producers with the expert to learn best practices.

## REGIONAL EXPERTS MEET AT AGBIZ WORKSHOP IN MACEDONIA

The Sixth RCI AgBiz Workshop took place in Skopje, Macedonia on November 10. More than 30 experts representing the USAID missions and projects from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia attended the round table. An EU projects specialist from Bulgaria and a specialist in rural areas development from UNDP Serbia also took part in the discussions, sharing valuable ideas and practical experience. The workshop discussions covered four main general topics – Regional Market Information Systems, Preparation for EU accession,

enhancing joint regional exports, and information exchange.

A common concern and focus for all USAID projects is the self-sustainability of the initiated activities after the projects are closed. Therefore, each projects is keeping in mind its future impact and opportunities for continuation, once it is in the hands of local profit and non-profit business organizations.

For further information, please contact the RCI team at [rci@bcserdon.com](mailto:rci@bcserdon.com)

## GEORGIA IT CONFERENCE: REACTIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS



**ABOVE** U.S. Ambassador to Georgia John R. Bass speaking to conference participants.

The State Commission of E-Governance Development of Georgia celebrated its innovations at the first annual IT Innovation Conference in Tbilisi, on October 29 and 30.

The new effort builds on earlier collaboration between MagtiCom and the Government of Georgia in procuring the Georgian Governmental Network (GGN). GGN links government offices throughout Georgia enhancing and improving services.

Vakhtang Lajeva, deputy minister of economic development, sees an even greater use for IT outside of improving government services.

“Information technology could serve Georgia as an enabling tool to further reduce poverty and enhance education through e-commerce, e-governance, e-services, and e-learning,” he said.

Zurab Magradze, system architect for the Georgian Government Civil Registry, emphasized the importance of networking and sharing information.

“The most important thing during these two days was that we were able to communicate with other organizations and share experiences,” he said. “We had a chance to get know how IT is developing in our region.”

Many participants thought the event was successful, including Sasha Bezuhanova, HP CEE public sector director.

“[It was a] very good event,” she said. “[It had] high quality content and a good selection of invitees, a high level of sponsorship, a platform for networking, experience exchange and new collaboration. I personally believe that the event achieved, at high standards, its goals.”

Vahan Hovsepyan, from the Union of Information Technology Enterprises, Armenia, concurred : “It was a great opportunity to meet our partners [at the] Georgia Innovation Event and share our ideas and initiatives, design plans for future cooperation and development.”

### LINKS

#### MISSIONS

Albania: [albania.usaid.gov](http://albania.usaid.gov)

Armenia: [armenia.usaid.gov](http://armenia.usaid.gov)

Azerbaijan: [www.usaid.gov/az/](http://www.usaid.gov/az/)

Belarus: [belarus.usaid.gov](http://belarus.usaid.gov)

BiH: [www.usaid.ba](http://www.usaid.ba)

Central Asia: [centralasia.usaid.gov](http://centralasia.usaid.gov)

Croatia: <http://zagreb.usembassy.gov>

Georgia: [georgia.usaid.gov](http://georgia.usaid.gov)

Kosovo: [www.usaid.gov/missions/kosovo](http://www.usaid.gov/missions/kosovo)

Macedonia: [macedonia.usaid.gov](http://macedonia.usaid.gov)

Moldova: [moldova.usaid.gov](http://moldova.usaid.gov)

Romania: [romania.usaid.gov](http://romania.usaid.gov)

Serbia and Montenegro: [serbia-montenegro.usaid.gov](http://serbia-montenegro.usaid.gov)

Ukraine: [ukraine.usaid.gov](http://ukraine.usaid.gov)