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## Global Forum sees information technology driving recovery and boosting democracy

By Jay Gillette , Network World , 10/27/2009

Bucharest, Romania — Against a background of economic and political crisis, the 18th annual Global Forum this week met in Eastern Europe for the first time.

### Global Forum highlights digital trust

The prestigious technology policy and development meeting emphasized the economic potential of information and communication technology (ICT) to pull the world into [recovery](#). The conference also underscored ICT's power to reinforce democratic movements in Eastern Europe and globally that are still experimental and potentially unstable.

Called "the Davos of IT," Global Forum's annual themes often track world trends in the information and communication industries. Attracting invited participants from 35 countries, conference panelists repeatedly emphasized this year's theme, "ICT and the Future of Internet: Opportunities for Stimulating and Reshaping the Economy."

The 2009 Global Forum was in part sponsored by the Office of the President of Romania and the nation's Ministry of Communications and Information Society. The head of state, President Traian Băsescu, addressed the delegates on the importance of information and communication technology to the future of his country and the region. Yet he cautioned that the industry must safeguard information integrity given widespread mistrust of state agencies and private enterprise institutions.

Băsescu said estimates of ICT impact on the Romanian economy showed it stimulates 4% of GDP savings annually through electronic payments; makes tax evasion difficult; and can result in a 10% to 15% decrease in the gray economy.

However, ICT providers and governments must assure both transparency and trust for end users, he said. Băsescu declared that given his country's prior history of governmental intrusion in personal affairs, citizens are rightly skeptical of providing ICT information, no matter how benign the application.

Băsescu spoke against a background of political crisis in Romania, as a parliamentary deadlock has resulted in calls for formation of a new government and the appointment of a new prime minister, the operational leader of government here. United States Vice President Joe Biden also visited the region this week to demonstrate American commitment to the region and its security.

President Băsescu also pointed out that the commitment to democracy may also be more compelling among the people of Eastern Europe, given that they have lived under repressive governments longer in modern times than people in more established democratic countries. Open governments with empowered people are more unusual, and more precious, he suggested, to people who have been deprived of them for long periods of their history.

Another notable plenary speaker was American ambassador Mark Gitenstein. Appointed by Barak Obama and in office in Bucharest only since July 2009, he is the first Romanian-American ever to serve in the position. Gitenstein said ICT is the economic engine that will propel continuing prosperity, especially here.

It is fitting that Romania is hosting the Global Forum this year, Gitenstein said, since ICT has been a major driver of economic development in the country. ICT here produces annual business revenues of 6.5 billion euros [\$9.77 billion], and 8% of GDP. ICT employs 50,000 workers, and the nation ranks third in global outsourcing services.

In other news, China's telecommunications and Internet growth is the continuing phenomenon of the era. According to the official Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), [China's](#) total population is 1.328 billion people, (54 % in rural areas). China's combined fixed and mobile telephone subscribers now number 1.03 billion—with 700 million mobile subscribers among them.

As of June 2009, Internet subscribers total 338 million, larger than the entire population of the United States. Of these, in August 2009, broadband users topped 97 million. The majority access the Internet through xDSL, accounting for 82% of the users.

Under the heading "Broadband as a driving force of the transformation of the economy and society of China," MIIT provided these statistics for the number of "Netizens" using each of these most popular Internet applications:

- SNS [Social Networking Sites]\*, 300 million (\*registration accounts)
- Online music, 289 million
- Internet news, 266 million
- Instant message, 244 million
- Search engine, 235 million
- Online video, 222 million
- Online gaming 217 million
- Email, 187 million
- Blog, 182 million
- BBS, 103 million
- Online shopping, 88 million

Xiaohui Yu of the MIIT indicated that "sales of e-commerce reached RMB 3.1 trillion [\$454 billion], 9.7% of the total retail turnover; the scale of B2C broke hundred billion RMB [\$14 billion]." Regarding e-government, he noted 100% of the branches of the central government, 100% of the province governments, 98.5% of the cities, [and] more than 95% of the county have portal Web sites" at this point for government services to Internet users.

Presenters from the China Academy of Telecommunications Research claimed [net neutrality](#) is not as pressing an issue in China as in the United States, but there have been a few recent cases where net neutrality policy would apply. For example, in 2008 a south China operator blocked or slowed traffic from competitor BT. There was another, compulsory tying case in 2007, where third-party advertisements were inserted without the agreement of users. Additionally, operators have introduced tiered services, with fast lane access to some subscribers who pay a premium for it.

The conference was held in the monumental People's Palace, the parliament building constructed by the Ceausescu government — the second largest office building in the world after the U.S.'s Pentagon. Memorably evoked by Herta Müller, winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Literature, the Ceausescu regime was notorious for repression and the use of extensive information apparatus for persecution of the population.

Sylviane Toporkoff, president of Global Forum, and a Founding Partner in sponsor ITEMS International, said it was symbolic of the changing era that Global Forum's open debates now take place in a building which once allowed no alternative opinions. It appears that against the shadows of political repression and global economic recession, information and communication technologies today are seen as guiding lights for a more hopeful 21st century world.

Global Forum 2010 will be held in the United States, most likely in Washington D.C. The 2011 meeting is planned for Asia, probably China, according to sources in the sponsoring organization.

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