

10th ECA (Europe-Caucasus-Asia) Legal Forum

18 June 2015, Tbilisi

Irina Paliashvili

Opening Remarks

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, Good Morning and Welcome to the 10th ECA Legal Forum in Tbilisi!

Before we start our Program, let me please express the deepest condolences to our Georgian Delegates, to Georgian people for the devastating flood. At the initiative of our Delegates, the Forum is organizing the collection of donations, the basket is placed at the registration table. Any donation will be welcome. Our Georgian Host Firm, BLC, and other Georgian colleagues, will make sure that 100% of our donations will go directly to the victims.

You know, I remember vividly how after 9/11 tragedy, there was an international legal conference scheduled in New York. It was probably 3 weeks after, when New York was devastated and empty from tourists and visitors. But the Delegates of the conference decided to go ahead and come from all over the world. I was there too, and can tell you how warmly New Yorkers, who are usually indifferent to such things, welcomed us and how much they appreciated our moral support.

This reminds me of a situation today, and I want to thank and welcome our Delegates, who by coming to Tbilisi, by offering their moral support and donations, demonstrated that our legal community stands together with Tbilisi residents. Everything what we do here is a contribution - however small - not only to Georgian economy, but, even more important, to the attractive image of Georgia, to its international reputation, to its resilience and recovery.

Unfortunately, we cannot prevent natural disasters, and man-made disasters too, and there is no shortage of those in our region, but we can stand together as a community and offer our help and sympathy, so thank you very much for that!

And with this I would like to welcome you in our native land, the most beautiful country in the world – Georgia! მოგესალმებით საქართველოში, ძვირფასო ქალბატონებო და ბატონებო!

Let me please introduce the panel, who came together to greet you. We have our Forum Co-Chair – John Whittaker from Clyde & Co (our other Co-Chair, Dimitry Afanasiev from EPAM sends his regrets, he really wanted to be here with us), Alex Bolkvadze from our Host Firm BLC Legal, as well as our special guests this year: Martin Solc, Vice-President of the International Bar Association (IBA).

Let me please stress the big input by IBA, whose moral support and substantive contribution to the Program are invaluable to us.

You know that it is our 10th Anniversary Forum, and it signifies the completion of the first spectacular life of the Forum. Our organizing team of RULG, and the current Organizing Committee are finishing their 10 year term and are transferring this institution to the IBA and to the new Organizing Committee.

Tonight at the Gala Dinner we will carry out the ceremony of passing the Torch, and will celebrate our Forum veterans, those of you who made all 10 Forums. We will also present to you the new Organizing Committee, which takes over and leads the Forum to its new life right after Tbilisi.

At the Gala Dinner we will also acknowledge all of our Host Firms, led by our wonderful Host Firm here in Tbilisi – BLC Law Office: they all have done a monumental amount of work, all on volunteer basis, to make your visit to their countries productive, smooth and enjoyable.

This all will happen at the Gala Dinner, but there are several very special ladies, whom I would like to acknowledge right here now. The Forum could not happen without 10 years of tireless and dedicated work of our Welcome Team and its veteran leaders Nonna Paliachvili and Lili Gokieli from RULG-Ukrainian Legal Group, they are the real heroes of the Forum! I am confident that after this they can successfully run the World Economic Forum, or the world! Here in Georgia our Forum has its own Guardian Angel, her name coincides with the new name of the ECA Forum – thank you Eka Mindiashvili! And thank you Gvantsa Korkia for being the Deputy Guardian Angel!

I would like also to thank all members of the Welcome Team - they are our colleagues – young lawyers, Tbilisi University law students (who greeted you at the airport at 3 AM with a big smile, and then, during the day, volunteered helping the flood victims!) – they may be your partners soon! The Forum proved it by the way because several members of the new Organizing Committee started as members of our Welcome Team.

On the occasion of celebrating the 10th Anniversary of the Forum, as a founder, I could go into a lengthy memoir about Life and Fate, and how the Forum started and developed into a successful and beloved institution. But let me please put it all into a 5 minutes summary, and who wants a whole story, please seat next to me at the dinner with a bottle of good Georgian wine.

The idea came to me I think in a far away 2004 after Clyde & Co International Local Counsel dinner in London.

The person with whom I first shared this idea is here, and he enthusiastically supported it ever since – John Whittaker – who figuratively speaking fathered the Forum with me. John became a Co-Chair from the start. Our other co-chair, Dimitri Afanasiev, came to the second Forum in Baku, fell in love and remained a loyal supporter ever since. His firm hosted the 3d Forum in St Petersburg.

Many Delegates ask me: “the Forum is your baby, how can you think of leaving it?” First, I am not abandoning the Forum and will be serving as its Honorary Advisor. I also would like to thank those members of the current Organizing Committee who volunteered to serve as Honorary Advisors too.

Second, the answer is simple, as a proud mother of the grownup daughter, Nonna, who is here by the way, I know what it means to let your child go when the time comes. You understand that no matter how difficult for you, it is in the best interest of your child.

The Forum will have a new life, I am sure as successful as its first life. IBA is a global and most important organization for our profession. There are several regional Forums, European, Latin American, Balkan, which are flourishing under the auspices of IBA. IBA will provide a platform for our Forum, will help with all technical and promotional work, while the substance and the program will be still developed by the Organizing Committee. I am also sure that the principles of the Forum, and its special atmosphere we have enjoyed for 10 years – atmosphere of community, friendship, enthusiasm, openness and fun will be preserved too!

We are very proud of the new Organizing Committee, they represent the generational change in the leadership of the Forum. In 10 years we have witnessed how a new generation of partners emerged in our law firms, they are more globalized, more IT-savy, more active than our generation, and they will do their best in giving a fresh start to our institution.

Our region is a complicated one, always has been, and is especially now. One of the key principles of our Forum, that it must be entirely free from politics, does not allow me to elaborate, although as a lawyer and as a patriot of Ukraine and Georgia, I have strong opinions about current events. However, this crisis will pass, and our region has no better way, but to integrate itself into the global economy and into the civilized world.

And we do represent a great value for the global economy and culture. Look at the map of our region: it is the most valuable connection between Europe and Asia. We are at the crossroads between East and West, historically, economically and culturally. The ancient and the modern Silk Road passes exactly through our region. In fact, we are the Silk Road!

Of course, the modern Silk Road, same as the ancient one, is full of traps, which in turn translates into plenty of work for us, the Silk Road lawyers!

So, this is my present to the new Organizing Committee, think of replacing the current moto of the Forum “Know your Local Counsel – Recognize an Opportunity”, which became outdated in 10 years, with a new one: “*We are the Silk Road!*”

As always, the Forum gathers managing partners from top law firms from all around the ECA region, and partners from law firms from all around the world. I would like to extend a special welcome to our guests: small but active group of in-house counsel, the representatives of professional media and the legal industry, and to our Honored Guests – representatives of Georgia’s government, legal and cultural community!

Let me finish with the reminder about our important tradition: we came here for the pleasure of communicating with each other, so let’s also keep outside the Forum our multiple gadgets, iPads, iPhones, etc. We want to look each other in the eyes, but you cannot do it if your eyes are glued to your iPad! Let’s not socialize with our gadgets! Our tradition is that nobody should stand alone during coffee breaks or social events, if you someone alone, please come up and introduce yourself. There is plenty of potential business circulating at the Forum, so please do not waste this opportunity!

Wishing you a successful and productive Forum! *We are the Silk Road!*