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Ukraine forum unites CIS as it faces up to its bribery and corruption demons

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With the country's Orange Revolution lingering in the atmosphere and optimism present in the attitudes of its people, Ukraine deserves its reputation as the most forward-thinking of the CIS nations.

That said, Ukraine does have a number of problems, which are shared with its ex-Soviet neighbours that stretch from Minsk in the east to Almaty on the borders of China in the west.

Those two capitals and those of the other CIS nations, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, have a shared political past but do not share stable economies or legal markets.

Ukraine and Russia have both seen big improvements in the standards of their law firms in recent years, but back in Kiev there is still one issue that, apart from the economy, unites all the firms that attended the forum.

"Corruption is our single biggest enemy," said Dimitry Afanasiev, a partner at Egorov Puginsky Afanasiev & Partners during the opening seminar.

Improving the rule of law is the major challenge for these nations. CIS law firms are trying to operate to a high standard within political systems that can see bribery reach the highest levels of government.

As one delegate put it: "In Western Europe, a bribe is paying for something that you're not entitled to and would not otherwise receive. In Ukraine and other countries in CIS, a bribe also means paying for something that you are entitled to but will not otherwise receive."

And so it is clear why Irina Paliashvili, the host, chooses to organise this non-profit event. Paliashvili is the president and senior counsel of RULG-Ukrainian Legal Group, a 22-lawyer firm with an office in Washington DC.

There is no doubt that the lawyers at the forum are shaping their respective legal markets back home. The economic challenge (most believe it will improve quickly), the corruption (endemic and long-term) and the standard of law schools were some of the main talking points at the conference.

Lawyers from the UK and US who attended included faces from Linklaters, Nabarro and Clyde & Co. They were joined by lawyers from firms across Central and Eastern Europe, there to test the mettle of their CIS cousins.

Referrals are a tricky business in this region and, as many delegates said, relationships benefit hugely from face-to-face meetings over vodka at dinner in this friendly setting.

Hopefully, those visitors from western Europe will have also benefited from the positive vibes and taken some back as a gift to their colleagues in London and New York.

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