

WCIT 2019 Positions Yerevan as an Emerging Global Tech Hub

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YEREVAN—The 23rd World Congress on Information Technology (WCIT) opened Sunday night with a historic concert in Yerevan’s landmark Republic Square. As the WCIT Orchestra (comprised of members from all 15 countries across the globe to have held the WCIT) under the tutelage of famed Armenian maestro Sergey Smbatyan played, music sheets were delivered to them in real-time by an Artificial Intelligence (AI) composer – the first in history. The concert would be capped with a set by electronic music legend Armin Van Buuren.

Early the following day, at least three thousand people from over 70 countries gathered in the main hall (dubbed ‘Universe’) of the Karen Demirchyan Complex to attend the historic event’s opening ceremony. “As an official partner of WITSA [the organization responsible for running the WCIT], we have been organizing WCIT Yerevan since 2017. We are extremely proud of the result,” said Aleksandr Yesayan, President of the Union of Advanced Technology Enterprises—the organization which represents most tech companies in Armenia.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan also took to the stage, saying: “As the host-country for WCIT 2019, Armenia provides an invaluable setting which will gather the world’s thought-leaders, business leaders and political figures to discuss some of the most significant questions facing the future of technology, the result of which may have far-reaching social, economic and political ramifications for all humankind.”

This year’s theme was the Power of Decentralization: Promise and Peril. Experts explored how information and communications technology is transforming our lives for better and for worse, including its impact on profits and prosperity, safety and security, democracy and humanity. This year’s Congress offered a space for one of the most comprehensive discussions on technology and its effects on society in the WCIT’s 40-year history, at least according to WITSA chairwoman, Yvonne Chiu.

WCIT is the oldest international technology conference to date. While the Congress has been overshadowed by more recent tech conferences like the Web Summit or AWWwards, it remains one of the most influential events in the global tech community, continuing to attract large international crowds and illustrious speakers including the likes of Microsoft founder Bill Gates, former US President Bill Clinton and more.

Following a keynote address by national security expert and author Richard Clarke, famed CNN Business anchor Richard Quest kicked off this year’s panel series in his trademark style by moderating a discussion on the promises and dangers that come out of creeping technology automation. Panelists included Tech Freedom’s Ashkhen Kazarian, entrepreneur Narayana

Murthy, Cambridge University's Christopher Marku, futurist Martin Ford, artist James Bridle and University College London Business Analytics program director Daniel Hulme.

There were also panel discussions on governance in the digital age, financing for innovative tech startups and the challenges of 'augmented' humanity.

Belarusian-born entrepreneur and motivational speaker, Gary Vaynerchuk – famous for yelling at audiences that there is no such thing as 'passive income' – opened the second day of the Congress to a packed auditorium. However, the main event remained the entrance of Armenian-American beauty-mogul and social media personality Kim Kardashian West.

Following her one-on-one with Salesforce board-member Magdalena Yesil before a captive audience, Kardashian West revealed her intention to produce some of her beauty lines in her mountain homeland of Armenia. Then she joined a panel with fellow American-Armenian entrepreneur and Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian, founder of Armenia's biggest tech success story Hovhannes Avoyan and GIPHY founder Alex Chung to discuss the effects of social media on our society.

On the third and final day of the conference, System of a Down frontman and activist Serj Tankian joined Matthew Feeney of the DC-based libertarian Cato Institute to discuss how technology greatly changes the way humanity relates to democracy in a panel moderated by noted intellectual Evgeny Morozov.

Ott Vatter, head of Estonia's e-residency program appeared on a Blockchain panel with Canadian-Armenian crypto leader Henri Aslanian before capping WCIT 2019 with a final panel on the digitization of medical records with the CEO of Armenia's e-health agency, Avet Manukyan, moderated once again by Ashkhen Kazarian.

The Armenian tech community also came together to award the winners of three startup lightning rounds with \$25,000 prizes each, moderated by CNN tech and business correspondent Samuel Burke and awarded by TechCrunch editor-at-large Mike Butcher.

Meanwhile, ministers of technology from dozens of countries attended a private seminar hosted by both the Armenian Ministry of High Technology and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss the effects of technology on cross-border diplomacy, statecraft, education and more.

Throughout the Congress, dozens of leading tech companies from around the world participated in a large exhibition in the lobby of the Soviet-modernist Demirchyan Complex. The largest, and arguably most controversial, came from Taiwan. Taiwan (known officially as the Republic of China, or 'Chinese Taipei' by Communist authorities in Beijing) has been one of the largest supporters of WCIT 2019, having contributed over four million dollars in donations and sending a 70-member strong delegation to the Congress. The ongoing cross-channel strife with the Communist People's Republic of China threatened to spill into WCIT Yerevan this week, as authorities in Beijing expressed their displeasure to WCIT's Armenian organizers of Taipei's participation in this year's activities. Regardless, the Smart Taiwan and Taiwan Excellence pavilions proved to be among the most popular on the exhibition floor, attracting long lines of curious visitors.

The Moscow City Government, one of WCIT 2019's official sponsors, also raised some eyebrows by exhibiting some of its new 'smart city' technology at the Congress. Russia has

made headlines for repressive tendencies in recent years, making its facial recognition technology and other tools feel somewhat out of touch with this year's theme of decentralization. This was an issue that Alexey Parabuchev, CEO of Moscow Agency of Innovations, addressed during the Smart Cities panel.

WCIT 2019 marks the first time in its 40-year history that the Congress was held in a small developing nation like Armenia. As PM Pashinyan pointed out during his opening remarks, "WITSA's decision to hold the Congress in Yerevan is a compelling acknowledgement of Armenia's status as a global technology hub." TechCrunch's John Evans seems to agree.