

AZERCELL

THE FUTURE IS DATA



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Among the forces that bind the people of Azerbaijan together is its mobile communications network: we talk to Azercell's recently appointed CEO about the technical and social aspirations of the company

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Chiril Gaburici, CEO

It is a truth universally acknowledged that everyone has to have a mobile phone these days and Azerbaijanis are no exception. 9.4 million people live in Azerbaijan, and while there are only a little less than 1.5 million landline subscribers there are more than ten million mobile network connections. In this, Azerbaijan is not very different from any other modern economy, but things have developed faster here than in many European countries. In 1997, the year after Azercell entered the market, it had 20,371 subscribers: today it has 4.4 million, 53 percent of a market it shares with two other significant players and 800 employees.

Azercell is part of the TeliaSonera group, Europe's fifth largest telecoms operator based in Sweden but active across the Nordic region as well as in Turkey, the Balkans, Spain and Russia among the 18 markets it now serves. The company is led by Chiril Gaburici, who under TeliaSonera's policy to rotate its CEOs periodically came in September 2012 into this challenging market from Moldova, 1,000 miles away and on the other side of the Black Sea.

The idea is to circulate these successful and proven managers so that they can bring new perspectives into established markets: "The telecoms sector is just about the fastest changing market there is," he says. "New technologies are being developed every day, and the customers' needs are changing just as quick. Whenever we do anything we are driven

by the urge to bring the latest technologies to the market." The people of Azerbaijan have a right to the most recent technologies available anywhere in the world, he believes.

This is the approach that has brought Azercell from number two in the market to the position of market leader, with clear water between it and its nearest rival. It is a matter of choice, and a majority of the population has chosen Azercell as a direct result, he is firmly convinced, of being able to offer the right strategies and the best in breed technologies. The company has invested

more than \$1 billion since it started operating here more than 16 years ago. "We put in the money and rolled out the service quickly, and that was one of the things that differentiated us. Innovative solutions and technology gave us the leadership – we had the first 24/7 call centre, the Azercell Ekspress concept

of a one stop shop where our subscribers are receiving all the services of a first rate, indeed world class phone network operator, with specific business solutions provided by third party partners in any areas to which our expertise does not extend. That way every Azercell Ekspress customer has a solution to all his communications issues."

With access to TeliaSonera expertise Azercell was able to lead in establishing 3G networks across the country, and has now become the first to offer a 4G service in the capital Baku. The list of firsts seems never ending: it was the first to roll out a GSM





service, the first with its prepaid SimSim card and the first company to achieve ISO 9001/2000 accreditation. Additionally, with more network base stations than any other operator its service is available to 99.8 percent of the population.

The key to this success, says Gaburici is the excellence of the team of engineers, which has not only done a great job in Azerbaijan but has been able to export its talent to many other markets within the TeliaSonera group. “We have our experts working in Moldova, Istanbul, Uzbekistan and Nepal. We put the subscribers right at the front of everything we do and do our best to make them happy. Our policy is to become the world’s number one service company, presenting the whole of our offering transparently and clearly so all the information is put in front of the subscriber and he does not get any surprises.”

The company’s ISO certification, he adds, extends to personal data, privacy and data security. “We have a saying in the company that the future is data! So we are investing in network quality that will give our subscribers more speed, more capacity and a more user-friendly experience. We will double our 3G network this year compared to last year to meet the huge demand that already exists. At the same time we are developing the future

– which I believe is the 4G network.” A strong mobile ecosystem is a tangible contribution to the quality of life of the nation, and he is determined to see the full package of technology and service extended to the more remote parts of the country without delay.

Meanwhile there is a constant need to work with the device and platform developers to ensure that the ever-increasing range of applications and modalities is supported

by the network. Here again Azercell takes a proactive stance, he says, making the latest smartphones available. The company’s latest campaign is for the Samsung Galaxy S4, which became the fastest selling smartphone in Samsung’s history when it was released earlier this year. Recently it was promoting Huawei, before that HTC, and the current campaign is for the latest Blackberry.

The company’s mantra is “Add Value: Show Respect: Make it Happen” and this, says Gaburici, is the litmus test he uses to judge every project. The last part is key to the way the company has grown, as we have already

Azercell’s call centre operates 24/7

**\$16
MILLION**

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**Amount spent
on social projects**

seen. It is also manifest in the way Azercell picked up sponsorship of Eurovision 2012 – having won it in 2011 Azerbaijan hosted the event last year, when it was neatly won by TeliaSonera’s home country Sweden. “I am proud that we were an integral part of making it happen – before Eurovision even people in the company had a hazy idea of where Azerbaijan is but afterwards they had no doubt!

But it’s no surprise that Azercell was able to make Eurovision happen – its implementation of new technology has been nothing short of unbeatable. By dint of forward planning, network preparation and testing the

**“EVERY AZERCELL EKSPRESS
CUSTOMER HAS A SOLUTION TO ALL
HIS COMMUNICATIONS ISSUES”**



Baku in Azerbaijan

equipment, services and frequencies it was able to get its 3G network live the day after the licence was granted. More recently, the implementation of 4G was similarly proactive and the team was able to throw the switch just a couple days from getting the go-ahead from the regulator.

And Azercell makes a lot of things happen

in the community as well. Chiril Gaburici is very proud of two mobile clinics that have been going round the country, especially places that don't have the best access to hospital services. One is an eye clinic that visits orphanages to make sure children have eye tests and free glasses if they need them. The other is a dental clinic. In all, the

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company spent \$16 million on social projects.

In 2009 Azercell founded the Barama Innovation Center in Baku. It is an incubator where young Azerbaijani entrepreneurs can develop their ICT and telecom-related innovations in a supportive environment before launching them in the marketplace. In partnership with Cisco Systems and USAID, up to 20 entrepreneurs at a time are given research space and resources for six to twelve months, depending on the complexity of their concept. “We don't give them fish; but we do teach them how to fish!” he says.

There's no doubt that Azercell is an effective telecoms company, and a feather in the cap of the country's economy – it is

after all the largest taxpayer outside the oil and gas sector. In 2012 it contributed \$115 million to the state – and in its 16-year history it has paid nearly \$1.2 billion. In partnership with the world's most recognised telecoms companies and with the support of TeliaSonera and its minority shareholder the Turkish mobile operator Turkcell it is in fine shape to take Azerbaijan into the 4G era and beyond, Gaburici promises. “The future is data!” **BE**

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